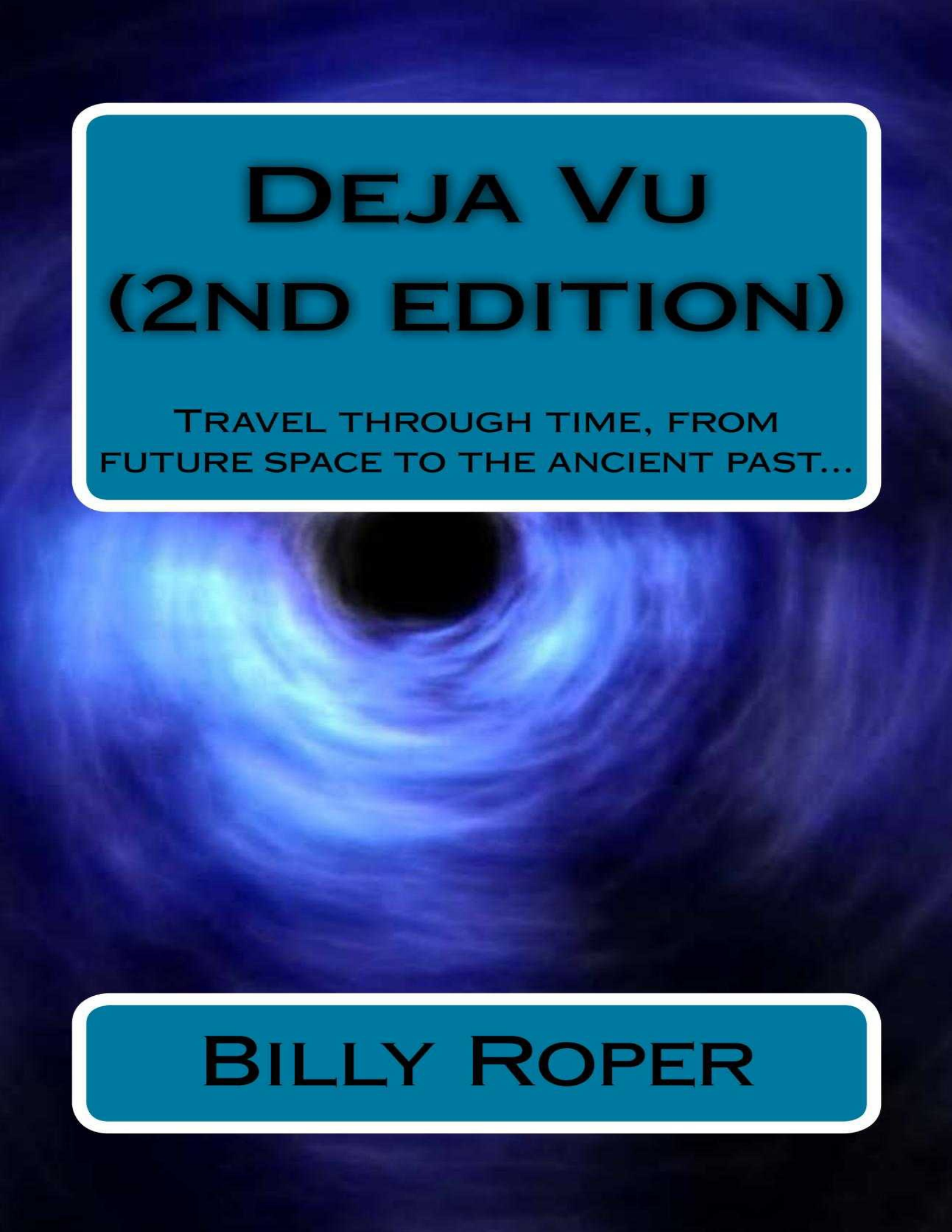
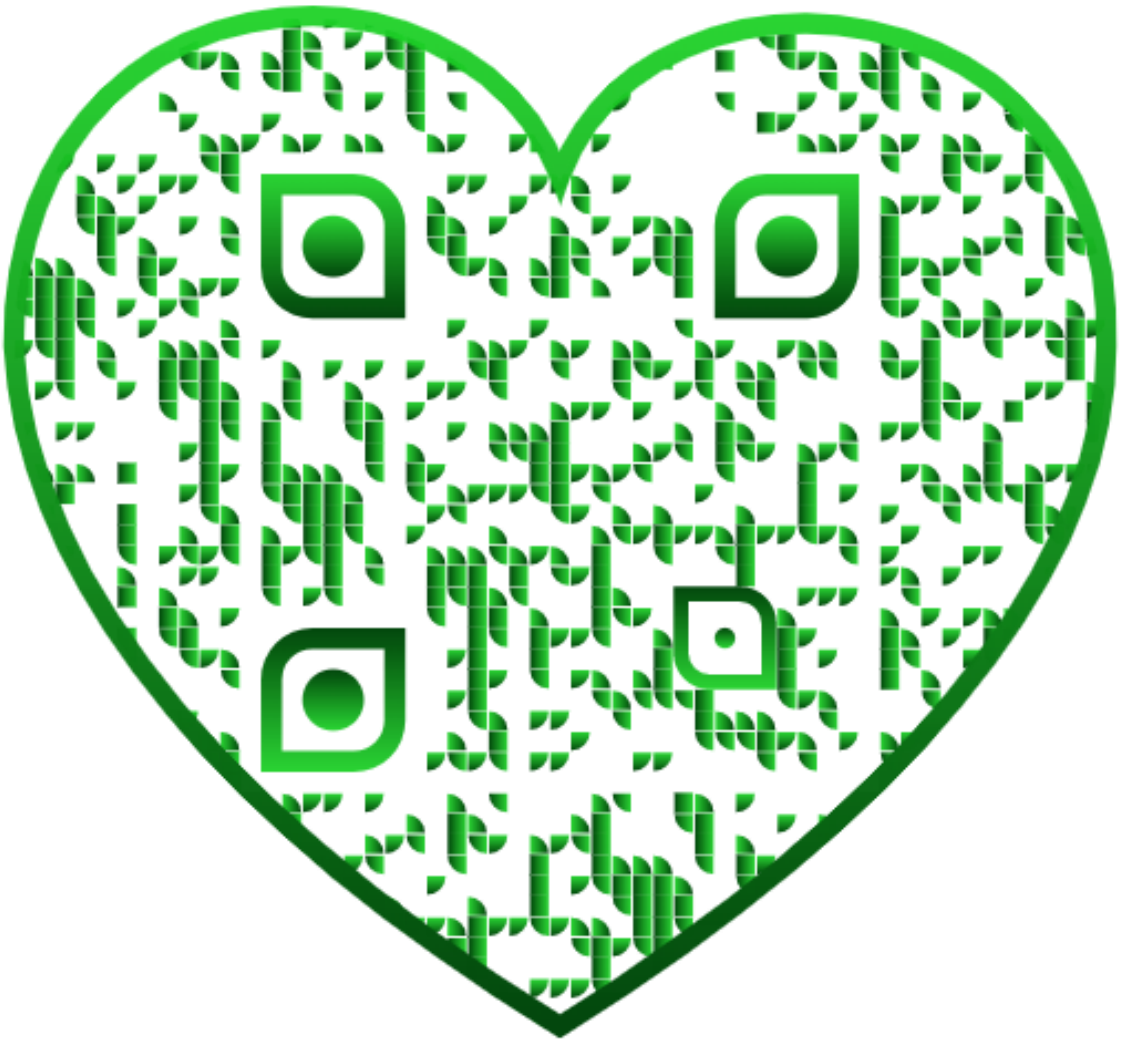


Deja Vu (2nd edition)

Travel through time, from future space to the ancient past...

Billy Roper



Déjà vu
By Billy Roper
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Dedicated to my Tina, again and always, over and over, forever; and to second chances.

Foreword:

Have you ever wished that you could just start over, and do things better, this time around? ‘Déjà vu’ is that feeling that something that is happening or is about to happen has already been experienced before. What if time travel, backwards only, was possible? What if changes engineered from the future left small moments of ghost memory where the past had been
overwritten, like recording over an old fashioned audiotape? We might call that ghost memory of overlap, ‘Déjà vu’. Chapter One

2 Kings 2:11, King James Version:

“And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, *there appeared* a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.”

Timeline A: The lights blinked out beneath them, sometimes one by one in relays like reverse fireworks, but more often in sheets, as whole power grids collapsed.

“For behold, darkness shall cover the Earth, and thick darkness the peoples,” somebody said quietly from behind him on the observation deck. Probably Marisa, she was the only other person on the whole base who might have read the Bible as more than a spoof. A nervous giggle followed from the back.

The communications channel was still open with Mission Control, carrying the thumping and crashing noises of looting and vandalism, and nothing

more. When the government Affirmative Action hires had taken over after the last supervisors had fled the city, (what, a week ago?) it had been much worse. Screams of rape and murder which they could only imagine, thankfully, as they listened. It was hard to think there could be anything still worth taking, by this point. Just wanton destruction for its own pure hedonistic sake, then. Surely they'd get bored with it soon and just leave. But the silence might be worse. Nobody else on Earth was still broadcasting, not to them, at least.

Australia had held out the longest, broadcasting in Mandarin, the native technikies managing to keep things limping along after the rest of the world went off the air or off its rocker. That had helped them understand how the crisis had played out, the latest crisis...the last crisis. Famines and food riots. Governments toppling. Racial unrest and ethnic cleansing. Even without the news, though, they could have guessed from the darkening lattice of lights punctuated here and there by fiery
mushroom clouds that rose up like angry boils towards them. It had been coming for a long time. Paul turned around to face the group. They were supposed to be a team. Somebody would have to hold them
together. Since the Chief Operations Officer had walked out of an airlock without her suit yesterday, there was nobody clearly in charge. That wouldn't do. It was his job, by right. He was next in line. Eighteen faces looked at him expectantly, many streaked with tears.

“Alright, folks, show's over for now. We all have jobs to do. Let's go back to our stations, and we can talk about it tomorrow at the staff meeting. Oh-eight hundred.”

Grudgingly, taking another look at their old home, they slowly shuffled out. Some cast glances at him over their shoulders, and he nodded reassuringly. Paul watched the fires for another minute before going back to Ops, himself. He would not think about Terri and the kids. He would not. Staying busy, that was the key. Marisa watched him thoughtfully from the corridor, her own mind working on far different problems.

There wasn't enough to do to keep his mind numb, and too much that nothing could be done about. At the meeting, it became clear just how bad off they were. The reports were grim. They'd gone on half rations and tried to ramp up

the hydroponics production lab immediately when a now presumably dead NASA white coat had admitted there was no budget for a resupply mission. No, certainly not a rescue mission, either. That had been half a year ago. They'd made do. Like they had any other choice, except the airlocks.

It didn’t help that most of them looked to him for solutions, now. He hadn’t asked for the job. Well, that wasn’t quite true, he actually HAD lobbied for it, just not under these conditions. What worked for his sanity might work to maintain theirs, too. Assign tasks right away. Research hypothetical food production alternatives. Research
hypothetical Earth return methods. Research estimated global population loss,
extrapolated outwards in six month steps. Work on tentative contact with the Soviets. Attempt communication with anybody still holding it together down there. Bring back reports tomorrow. That was all they could do for now. Already coalitions were forming. Paul could see the telltale danger signs. Engineering favored return. Habitat favored turning into farmers. Security opposed having anything to do with the Reds.

Rancor poisoned the recycled air as they argued about whether to stay put or try to repair the damaged shuttlecraft docked in their hangar. Dr. Leslie pointed out that even if they could produce enough food, oxygen, and water, their gene pool was too limited to produce a viable breeding population without the risk of eventual mutations from inbreeding. Of the eighteen surviving mission crew, only six of them were women of childbearing age. She suggested the prospect of in vitro fertilization and
hormone treatments, despite the limited gene pool. Nobody dissented, but it didn't feel like any kind of solution. The Soviet base, hundreds of kilometers away on the far side, was larger and presumably better equipped. However, even over sixty years after the Third World War, they were more likely to be enemies than genetic donors. And, they might not be in any better shape than the U.S. crew on Luna base. It was hard to say, because they weren't talking to them, and hadn't been. Col. Ritter, as the Pentagon liaison and Chief of Security, wanted to keep it that way, and wasn’t shy about saying so.

If he was going to find a way back to Terri again, Paul knew that he had to keep a level head in charge. That meant civilian control over the base. Him.

Losing a half dozen American cities in nuclear flame a generation ago had created a shrill paranoia among most military lifers, and hurt their pride even more. Ritter would have them all staging raids against the Soviets if he had his way. That would mean never seeing his kids again. It couldn't be allowed.

Marisa and two technikies; Harris, the astrophysicist, and Jones, the nuclear engineer in charge of the reactor, backed him up in issuing assignments to the crew. At least he had some support. Christine Leslie seemed to be leaning towards supporting the Habitat faction. It seemed likely to Paul that she was more interested in the opportunity for unfettered genetic experimentation than in surviving or getting home. The mad scientist in her was already showing. He'd have to leverage her personality against Ritter's to build a majority coalition of his own, and balance the three groups. It hadn't even taken a second for him to decide what he wanted to do. Paul wanted to go home.

Two hours later the video loop of his last message from home was interrupted by a soft chime at the doorway of his berth.

"Assistant Chief?" Marisa's calm voice asked from the narrow corridor.

"Enter." Paul responded, closing the screen he'd been staring at blankly since the meeting ended. The soft hiss of the door sliding open and closed behind her made him turn in his chair. This end of the room was too narrow for two people to stand up in at once without an uncomfortable violation of personal space, even by astronaut standards. "How can I help Psych today?"

His forced smile was a healthy sign to the base therapist, who took at it as his attempt to cope. He had been put in charge by accident or fate, and was doing his best. Good. Marisa took a deep breath, then began her prepared rundown of each crew member's mental state, one by one. The fact that she's missed the Chief Operations Officer's suicidal tendencies made her more diligent than she had been…perhaps obsessively so, Paul thought, but who was he to psychoanalyze the only shrink in ten thousand miles? When she ran out of breath and diagnostics, he held up a slightly trembling hand to stop her from going on. She noticed the ring on the finger, and held her silence.

"So, you agree with me about Leslie and Ritter. Both have their own personal agendas. Or rather, their impersonal ones. Who else might be a threat to

themselves or others on base?”

Marisa blinked in surprise. That hadn’t been exactly what she’d said, but it was what she was working her way around to. The new boss wanted to cut to the chase, then. Okay. She could do that for him.

“Chief”, she replied, purposefully dropping the technically correct ‘Assistant’ qualitative title prefix, “you can count on my support, and Jones and Harris. That throws in the other three science technikies with them. That makes a third of the crew. It’s a solid base to build on. We all want the same thing. But Ritter has his supporters, too. So does Leslie. I think we both could make the same list of who they are, and will be, without naming names yet.”

It was Paul’s turn to be surprised. Marisa Crosseli didn’t fit the stereotype for a head doctor, especially since the field of
psychotherapy had gone completely
pharmaceutical. Her shoulder length brown hair and luminous dark eyes showed her Italian ancestry, but otherwise her
complexion was ivory, to match her almost elfin size. Her personality was just the opposite, which was what made her an effective counselor. Even so, such bluntness was unusual from her. Then again, he reflected, they were living in unusual times, to say the least. Her eyes searched his face, questioning.

“Aside from your normal rounds, since there are no daily psych stat reports to make Earthside, do you think you could work up some profiles of the swing votes, as well as how to best, uhm, encourage them to see reason?” he asked, leaning back in the chair to shift his view higher than her torso in the confined space. Even if it was a nice torso. His mind skipped sideways to Terri, and the weekend vacation they’d spent in the Biloxi safe zone.

Marisa didn’t miss a thing. She watched his eyes drag upwards, and felt herself flush. There was a reason why long term duty assignments on Luna were discouraged for married personnel. Several, in fact. “Yes, Chief Riley. I can do that.” She focused on their duty, as she had a hundred times before over the last year. She wasn’t some
schoolgirl, after all, she told herself.

“Before tomorrow morning’s meeting, maybe?” Paul pushed. “I want to be ready for whatever comes at us from the others.” He made eye contact, judging her loyalty and motivations.

“I’ll bring something over by the end of second shift, Sir,” Marisa promised. “Right after the evening…” Her voice broke and trailed off. She had been about to say, ‘”right after the evening news feed”, but there wouldn’t be any more of those now. Not for a long time, at least. She looked down, then back at him. The little Crosseli girl had been a war orphan, with no surviving family, like most of the NASA recruits chosen for long term missions countering Soviet expansion. To be exact, they’d survived the war, but died of aggressive cancers a decade later from exposure to fallout from New York. They’d considered themselves lucky to have a child, first. The waif wasn’t so sure. Only the civilian admin like him had anyone left down there, close. If he even still did. He felt like he did. There had been no moment of loss, of pain, as if from an unseen death in his family. Paul hoped that meant something. As to Faith…Faith hadn’t been much of a strong point for him since the Armistice. Mandated public atheism legislated by the capitulating Congress had made that the case for most Americans his age. He was a decade older than the early middle aged woman standing before him looking so much like the teenager who’d run away from public foster care. He had kids about ready for college. Or, he had. If Terri had gotten the family out of the city in time…When he looked up from his thoughts, he was alone again. The therapist had discretely closed the door behind herself on the way out.

He’d exfoliated and u .v. rinsed before changing into a fresh coverall by the time Marissa came back to go over the profiles, but had forgotten to eat, so she ducked out to fetch him a tray and bring it back while Paul read her reports. Col. Ritter had digiposted a rant about using a dissident German techniki on the Soviet base to open their airlock access for a ‘reconnaissance mission’ that had taken a half hour to respond to diplomatically, and two of the Habitat department personnel had come by in person requesting permission to begin reconstituting human and other sourced biodegradable nutrients for recycling into fertilizer to mix with lunar dust. After ten minutes of jive talk he’d

relented and allowed the toilets to be mined. At least that would keep them busy, and was relatively harmless, compared to the proposed military adventurism.

Marissa went back over her notes while he chewed thoughtfully, nodding at what seemed like the appropriate pauses. He'd already made up his mind what to do, he just needed her to convince herself to be on board with it. Even better, that it was her idea. She was smart enough to play along and let him think that she thought it was. After a half hour, it was determined that the potential for trade and mutual cooperation with the Soviet base could be used to cement what they were already coming to call the Farmers on their side against the Hawks. Funny that they didn't bother to think of a name for their own pro-evacuation coterie. Col. Ritter a level down was sure to have come up with plenty, though. Their potential allies and enemies were discussed, one by one, again. Weaknesses were probed. Strengths were assessed. Shifting back into professional mode, the therapist in her could tell that he needed to vent, so Marissa let him wander off track and talk about the flowers his wife had planted in the yard just before they had left, and how frustrating it was that their youngest son couldn't seem to function without having his face plugged into an electronic device or two. Paul's voice remained quiet as usual, but the tears streaming down his cheeks screamed out his pain and fear to the vacuum.

Very few orphans believed in hugs, in her experience, but she had found them to be very therapeutic, and pretended not to notice how he responded unconsciously to the contact. Marissa kept her arms tightly folded as she squelched down the sterile white tube to her own berth. It was going to be a long night. Just like so many before.

Paul lay as still as he could in the coffinlike confines of his bunk and tried to remember his children's faces, and the smell of his wife's hair. Once his mind drifted sideways into semi-consciousness, though, it got lost in the vision of the world going black and the screams of the unprepared. He awoke in a cold sweat, the eternally dim light making it impossible to know how long he'd slept. Checking the chron embedded above him, it seemed unlikely that only three hours had passed. His mind tried to hold on to what felt like weeks of memories as they slipped away, out of his grasp, forgotten to

wherever they had come from. It was probably just as well. Usually they ended badly. At least he had time to get ready for the meeting.

Dr. Leslie's cold gray eyes regarded him suspiciously from across the table. She sensed that his giving the fertilizer
experiment request a go-ahead was some kind of trap, but she didn't know quite how to counter it without seeming undiplomatic. People skills weren't on her resume. That made it hard enough for the medical officer to understand and gently guide the four colored Habitat workers, three contentious females and a leering male, who chose to make up her coalition mainly out of hatred for the White scientists and soldiers who represented the dwindling minority of their former masters. They followed her lead in stating their preference for staying put not out of deference to her, though being a woman made her less offensive to them than if she had been a White man. They just wanted to be rebellious against the authority, even though their presence there as
representatives of the hiring quota laws showed who was really in charge. At least, who had been in charge before the lights went off down there. If the government had collapsed, as it seemed to, then all bets were off.

The Comm officer's report this morning was grim enough to make it seem like total anarchy had broken out Earthside. There were still hourly databurst streams to the Soviet base from Moscow, but even Ritter's techniki couldn't crack the Kremlin's encryption codes. They could only guess at what was being said, back and forth. She hated being talked about behind her back, especially in Russian. A few relay satellites still were carrying orbital rebroadcast of planetary communications from the U.S., most of them Emergency Broadcast System instructions on a loop to remain indoors and calm, or contrarily, to proceed in an orderly manner to listed evacuation and refugee centers. At least there had been no new thermonuclear explosions on the surface overnight, though plenty of big conventional ones had registered on their sensors, especially in the Middle East and Central Europe, which seemed to be rebelling against Warsaw Pact forces. That was some good news, at least.

The one person itching for a fight at the table was Ritter, she could see it in his florid face. If he couldn't fight the looters and food rioters back home, or

the Soviet proxies in Austria and France, he wanted to fight the Reds where he was, by God. Along with his three person security staff of Marines, who also pulled double duty in Comms, which gave the Colonel an insider's control of the information flow, the flight crew grudgingly supported him, too. The doctor calculated that Riley and Crosseli would have to break that alliance if they wanted to gain a quorum of support to evacuate. Not even their scientists could fly them home, even if they did get the shuttle repaired, without the pilots and engineer.

She was perfectly able to compromise. Ritter might not be willing to let anybody take the shuttle, unless she threw in with the Assistant Chief against the Colonel and made him so outnumbered that he had no other choice. If the rats who wanted to flee what they thought of as a sinking ship were allowed to do so, taking the only means of escape with them, then the rest would be forced to go along with her plans to begin genetic cross-cloning and in vitro fertilizations. Provided, of course, she could outmaneuver the warrior caste who wanted to throw her whole breeding pool into the meatgrinder of Lunar war.

Paul was taken aback when the Farmers voted along with the Scientists to look into the potential of repairing the mothballed shuttle. The pilots looked excited at the prospect, too, despite stern glares from Ritter. At least he had a solid majority of support, for the moment. Aside from the five scientists and flight crew's reassignments to the hangar, the remaining staff continued with their normal duties, the Habitat workers collecting and reconstituting waste matter from the recycling system to make soil, and Dr. Leslie asking for volunteers to submit DNA samples for her own experiments. He stepped forward first, to repay her for the alliance, even if it was temporary. All of the other staff followed his example except for Ritter and his three Marines, who stood as one and walked out together. Probably plotting a coup, since they were the only ones with access to the armory. Well, he couldn't afford to worry about things that were outside of his control at the moment, like how Terri and the kids were doing.

The next day, the shuttle analysis was grim. Even if they tried to make their own replacement components in the repair shop, the flight engineer stated that it would be eight months before they could even manufacture enough

fuel for the boosters. That just couldn't be sped up without a larger facility, and the Soviets weren't likely to help. Even at half rations, their food supplies would be gone weeks before then. Paul considered reassigning more people to the Farmer's soil production efforts, and asked Dr. Leslie to focus on creating and preparing plant seeds of edible varieties from their limited frozen fresh food stores. She wouldn't like being taken away from her embryonic experiments, but the physician was the closest thing to a botanist they had. Marissa agreed, and the docking bay, as the largest available open area, was transformed into a greenhouse. Harris and Jones were told to continue exploring other options. He explicitly told them and their three underlings to think outside the box. They took him quite literally, as it turned out.

Marissa tried to keep peace between the competing work details. Bumping into each other in the narrow corridor between the hangar where the flight crew continued desultory work on the shuttlecraft and the odorous docking bay next door led to more than one shoving match. Somehow a vacuum pack of feces was released on the hangar side. Paul had to step in and order reduced rations for the Habitat crew until one of them was given up as the culprit. His first act of administrative discipline led to a week of confinement to quarters for D'andre. The other colored staff, including the women who had turned him in, protested the punishment as being racist, but work went on. They wanted to eat, like everybody else.

Col. Ritter's quarter of the staff confined themselves to their berths, the armory, and the Comm station, interacting with the rest of the crew only while on their routine patrols of the base, and then only minimally. The Colonel had taken over reporting intercepted radio and video traffic
personally to Acting Chief Riley via impersonal datadumps each day. Aside from the continuing Soviet transmissions, there wasn't a lot to talk about, anyway.
Disruptions caused by the limited nuclear exchanges decreased to show a lot of the world had gone silent. Some military units were still broadcasting orders to troops in the field, who seemed to be fighting one another on the behalf of at least three factions claiming legitimate successorship to the national government. Roughly, the nation seemed to be devolving into a regional and ethnic civil war, with all sides blaming the others for genocide.

Ritter stated that “his command” was remaining neutral in the conflict, for the time being. Paul chuckled at that, sure that the forces on the ground were heartbroken.

Russian troops were in Alaska, as ‘peacekeepers’, of course, and the Mexican army was occupying California. Overseas, the fighting in Europe seemed to have intensified, perhaps limiting the number of available forces that could be sent into Alaska. Germany was in full revolt. Little reached them from Asia or Africa, except that China and India were at war again and the Boers had taken over the South African government and annexed Rhodesia. Even though it wasn’t much compared to the traffic they’d received a month earlier on a regular basis, it was still more information than they needed, or could deal with. Paul swallowed back his pride and talked to Ritter via reply long enough for them both to agree that it would harm station morale to discuss the civil war with staff. They’d keep that quiet for now, and focus on day to day survival. And, of course, their desperate plans for the future. Any future.

When the tiny green leaf tops of the first potato plants sown from eyes carefully cut out of dehydrated stocks first peeked up from the reeking muck in the docking bay, Paul called for an evening of celebration. Their daily staff meetings had become shorter and more focused as his authority had been accepted, and this would be a chance for all of them to blow off some stress and celebrate a small victory. Even Ritter and his Marines came, although they stood stiffly in a corner, trying hard not to have fun. Of course Riley praised Dr. Leslie and her crew of Farmers to fluff them, and announced that the first crop of potatoes should be ready to eat in about four months. Music was played, contraband alcohol was consumed, and somehow he ended up dancing with Marissa, even though her face kept shifting into Terri’s. That night in his berth the theme continued, and he was relieved to wake up alone, not sure where the night had ended and the dreams had begun.

The careful monitoring of artificial light, water, and oxygen levels in the docking bay was carried out religiously by the Farmers over the next few weeks, and each day a new picture of the growing shoots was broadcast to the cafeteria screen so the progress could be seen by all. The flight crew reported that they would soon have processed enough hydrogen fuel for the rover if he wished to make surface trips, insinuating that they might give that

information to Ritter who would use the vehicle to attack the Soviet base if Paul didn't allocate more labor resources to help them with the shuttle repairs. He ignored the silent threat and called in Harris and Jones, the scientists, to see if they had come up with anything worth pursuing, or if they could be put back on shuttle duty to secure the continued support of the flight crew. As usual for such conferences lately, he had them come to the Admin office that he had taken over as his own, along with the slightly larger berth formerly occupied by the Chief. She didn't need it any more, after all.

Harris was a tall, skinny Brit with an Oxford accent and PhD credentials to match. Jones was a southerner, with a sulky temper and a razor sharp intellect. Harris led the other three scientists, who were also from the United Kingdom, America's last remaining ally. Jones led himself, but he alone kept the reactor going that kept them all alive. Both of the academics shared a nerdy sense of discomfort that he tried to soothe by telling them that he was going to trust them with some news that they could NOT share with the rest of the crew. News that might assure them of the importance of finding a way home. The two exchanged pale glances as Paul told them the latest: the southeastern U.S. had declared
independence as a black kingdom called 'New Africa', Mormons had taken over the western part of the nation that hadn't been gobbled up by Mexico, and millions of people were starving as winter set in down there. Here, even with new potato crops every quarter, they couldn't afford any increase in population, so Dr. Leslie's 'New Eden' project to keep the species going was a moot point. They'd still had no
communication with the Soviet base. Probably the Reds didn't consider them worth bothering with.

" Now, what have the five of you come up with, to make us a future out of?" he asked, standing in front of the two seated
technikies.

"Bugger all." Harris answered for the British contingent, immediately. Jones nodded. Paul blinked.

"Excuse me?" he ventured. Jones sat up straighter in his plastic chair.

"What my colleague means to say is, it's not about the future, Chief." the

southerner offered.

“Too right, ‘cause that’s not where the problem is, is it?” Harris put in. Rapidly losing his patience, Paul took a deep breath and tried one more time.

“What…exactly…do you mean? Where IS the problem, then?” he asked Harris, directly.

“Sure and it’s in the past, isn’t it, Squire?” the Brit replied, grinning crookedly. The Chief took a chair of his own. This was going to take a while, he saw.

An hour later he called in Marissa to listen to what he was hearing. He wanted her professional opinion on whether Harris and Jones had gone mad from the isolation and stress of their situation. Two hours after that, he told the scientists to continue their work in the same direction, sent them on their way, and put his head in his hands on the desk to cry. If this was their only hope, then God help them. Marissa cleared her throat, reminding him that she was still in the room. Wiping his eyes, Paul looked up at her. She looked dazed, as well. “Okay. You heard it. So, what do you think?” he asked her. She told him what she thought.

“Chief…Paul…I believe in God. I don’t see any contradiction between that and science.” She began.

“I know. Go on.” He encouraged her. She sat silently thinking for a moment, reaching inwardly for the best way to express her faith.

“My God is the God of all time and space. Nothing is beyond His control or reach. So, nothing is impossible. For my part, I’ll pray that if it’s His will, we can do it.” He had known what she was going to say, he just needed to hear it. His own judgement couldn’t be trusted about such a thing.

Physics. Quantum dynamics. Tachyons. Particles in the reactor core. Decelerators around the station’s external power grid. Travel faster than the speed of light could breach the space-time continuum, theoretically. Einstein’s general relativity, basically. Enough energy to move a mass faster than the speed of light, and ‘hello tomorrow’. In reverse, then,

deceleration, time could be sped up perspectivally, to the point that a particle, or a person, stayed put while time flowed around them. Putting the brakes on a speeding vehicle so hard that it rocked backwards into reverse while the world whiplashed past. The effect would be that particle or person moving backwards in time, relatively speaking. Literally, if time was waiting on them, it would be backing up. At a certain rate, a vortex of energy might be controlled in depth to focus the target upon which the opposing wormhole tube end would rest, in the past. Shaking a garden hose to make the opposite nozzle land on the intended shrubbery, it was explained by Harris. Fair enough, then, he could envision that analogy.

But the water could only flow one way. Downhill. Backwards in time. Without an interdimensional pump, whatever that meant. With a way to reverse the tachyon particle decelerator into an accelerator, forward movement in the space/time continuum was theoretically possible, but that wasn't the way they needed to go, anyway. And the longer the wormhole, the harder it would be to focus the other end. Oh, and there was one other thing. If it did work, or if it didn't, there'd be no coming back, except by the conventional means of time's normal speed. And even then, one would come back forward to a different future, changed by one's presence in the past. Which was precisely the point, Jones insisted. Paul's head hurt.

For the next three days the four of them met, hours on end. The third day the other three scientists squeezed in, too. Life was so surreal and hopeless, he just decided to suspend his disbelief as Marissa suggested and pursue it. The Chief and the Counselor immersed themselves into the fantasy world as if it were a real project, and played along with the techniki and their plan. If they were going to die up here, they might as well die crazy as sane. Harris and Jones were giddy and giggly, like bad little boys getting away with something as their parents watched. They were really enjoying this. Surprisingly, Paul began to, too.

At night he dreamed of going back in time to do it all right. He'd find Terri years before, meet her earlier, love her longer and better. He'd be there for his kids, and never miss a thing. All of the moments he'd lost being consumed with work or the trivialities of life, he'd see, this time. Second chances would be taken advantage of, that was for sure. Nothing would be

wasted or go unappreciated. Just as he found her, though, he'd awaken in the Chief's berth, with her personnel effects still scattered around, and come back to reality. Somehow dumping her stuff had seemed disrespectful, but that day two boxes of extra coveralls, audiodiscs, vids, cosmetics, and other items were left in the cafeteria marked 'FREE'. It started a fight between two of the colored Habitat staff over some toiletries, but Paul had his own stuff moved into the Chief's berth by the end of shift, and told Harris and Jones to use his old berth as a project planning room.

Marissa was the one person he most trusted to decide where to make the change, once he arrived. Her ethics were the most sound, and her perspective the most objective. Each divergent historical
extrapolation from the change had to be weighed and measured from every possible angle, though. Ripples had to be calculated as far out as possible. The research load would be tremendous for her, so he told her to get started immediately. Since the temporal effect would not shift the
wormhole ending position in space, only in time, it would still be in this spot, on the moon, where he landed…so the initial endpoint must be July 20th, 1969. The first manned landing on Luna. That would give him a day to reach the Apollo 11 landing site. The fact that he would be the one to go was never brought into question, and didn't even require any consideration. Paul took it upon himself as his duty.

A week of experimentation with the reactor which gave two of the scientists nearly lethal radiation doses and caused three monetary station blackouts later, and the decelerator tubing had been successfully installed through EVAs and tested. Ritter's patrol had seen pairs of the project staff exiting and reentering the airlock repeatedly to put it in place. Four days later, one particle arrived 0.0000645 seconds before it left. When Harris stopped throwing up from radiation sickness, he cheered and weakly sang 'God Save The Queen' over the intercom. Everybody on the station knew that something was up, but none of them had dared ask, yet. Paul knew that the questions would be coming, and he wanted to avoid them, if possible by not being in the century when they began. The planning sessions stretched far into the night. His old berth began to smell of stale sweat and fried electrical parts.

Dr. Jones buzzed him one morning to tell him that they were about to conduct

their first human test trial in an hour, and he was intercomming him ‘from the past’ to let him know so he could witness it. They hadn’t invited him to the show in case it didn’t work any better than their first attempts to transport inanimate objects had before they’d moved on to bacteria samples. It was kind of hard to explain to the staff why a stylus was fused with the corridor wall right at shin level.

Marissa lay awake, barely, her head drowsily nestled into his shoulder, when suddenly she pulled his chin down. Expecting a kiss, Paul was surprised to see self-doubt in her eyes. Her usually calm assurance was missing.

“What is it, what’s wrong?” he asked. He tried to push aside the wave of guilt he felt, guilt at her still being here in his berth with him alone, and why she was there, guilt over thinking of Terri while Marissa was there, and guilt over feeling more guilt than any other emotion about it all. ‘Focus, man!’, he thought to himself. ‘Live in the moment, it may be all you have’.

“What if one try isn’t enough?” Marissa offered, making him wonder which of several possible subjects she was talking about at the moment.

“Umm, what do you mean?” he sought clarification. She caught his eyes, and grinned, embarrassed at understanding what he’d been thinking.

“Silly, I mean, what if the first change doesn’t work, or doesn’t work completely, or doesn’t work the right way, so that you decide we’ve… you’ve…fixed things well enough?” she wondered aloud, putting her head back down so he couldn’t see her weakness.

“Oh,” he began to answer, chuckling. “You mean the future and past of the entire human species, I see. I thought you were talking about something more important, there for a second.” They both laughed softly and held each other close. It was something to think about, though. A real problem to consider. Better than baseball stats, anyway.

The next morning, Paul stopped by to tell Harris and Jones that after they got a wormhole open that was more than particle sized, he needed them to work on making the generating device portable. So he could take it with him, and use it multiple times, if necessary. Their mouths were still hanging open in

shock when he let the door hiss shut and continued down the corridor to get some breakfast and check on the potato plants.

Timeline B: Deadlines. How he hated deadlines. Nobody liked them, of course, not even those liars who claimed that they needed the focus and structure to get their projects done. He hated them more than most writers, because it was hard for him to produce under pressure. It was like having someone looking over your shoulder. Two hundred pages by Friday? Come on. Not if they wanted it to be anything that would sell. You didn't just pull a universe
populated by fairies and elves and run by magic out of thin air. Well, you did, but not if you were hyperventilating in it. Not to mention what it was doing to his skin.

He'd lived alone since his mother had passed, leaving the house to him, and with it all of the outstanding loans from places who didn't seem to understand that she was dead and unable to draw any more social security to pay towards them. That kept him stressed out enough, usually. Now this. It was no wonder he had never had time to meet anyone who shared his interests. There had been Paula, the administrative assistant he'd bought lunch for at the PanCon last year, but she'd stopped having anything interesting to say via e-mail when her cat had died, and he lost interest. It was so hard to work up the sympathy for a dumb cat, when he was dealing with everything he had going on his own life. If she couldn't understand that, then obviously she needed to reassess her life's priorities.

Paul Riley used the pen name Francesca DeMond for his popular "Gossamer Wood" series. He found that the books sold better that way. Actually, like everything else in his life, his publisher claimed that their focus group studies indicated a female fantasy writer had more natural rapport with her target audience. It was all about
marketing, and Paul didn't normally care, so long as it paid the bills. He didn't normally care what Trident Press had to say about anything. But the last few weeks hadn't been normal. The strange dreams he'd been having had kept him from getting the kind of sleep a writer needed to get a plotline going. He couldn't develop characters in the Gossamer Woods when his sleep was constantly interrupted by science fiction dreams.

He pushed his chair back a few inches and cracked his knuckles, looking at the glowing screen in front of him. Two calls already, today. Maybe he should see what he could come up with.

“Mind -Dread, the dark sorcerer whose realm of gray misery had for so long encroached upon the eastern fringes of the Gossamer Woods, shared the fate of all of the creatures living in the wild lands. He knew without consulting his oracle well that should the Elven empire fall, his would not stand long after. Thus, reluctantly, he had decided to project all of his magickal will into the Earth Mother’s web. Only by adding his strength to theirs might the Forest Folk prevail against the pack of voracious lupines already rampaging through the far reaches of the glens. This would cost every spell he might conjur, and even so victory was not assured. The vision of canine jaws ripping the wand from his wizardly hand caused his fingers to tremble as the finely ground valley herbs fell from them onto the mortar and pestle. If it were done, ‘twere best done quickly, and in secret. Gandelon, Queen of the Wood Elves, would see his fear as a weakness, as it was. She might not wish or trust his help, or worse, she might allow him to empty his ancient soul of magic in their cause, then vanquish him forever from her reaches. Such was a risk he must take…”

Mindy, the creative department’s new hot shot talent developer at Trident, listened closely while he read the opening over the phone, then sighed and asked Paul to tell Francesca to keep up the good work, it sounded great. Yeah, he’d get right on that. Just after lunch. For some reason, he was in the mood for potatoes.

Chapter Two

1 Kings 19:11-13, King James Version:

“11 And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake:

12 And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.

[13] And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah?”

Timeline A: The work on miniaturization went slowly. It was the kind of compaction which the Japanese had always been good at before they’d gone under the Chinese protectorate. For the British scientists, eliminating the redundancies and safeguards they’d engineered into the device was a painful process. There was a lot of
grumbling involved, but the necessity of logic prevailed. While the Farmers pulled the first potatoes and separated some out for replanting, the group of seven discussed how to test the wormhole without
eliminating themselves and the project from their future.

It was Dr. Jones who first theorized a projector for the tachyon stream vortex, similar to a hologram beam, to point to where the wormhole entrance would be generated. Backpack frame mounted, if possible, and focused straight ahead of the wearer.

Their late night talks about the flexibility of space and time had led Paul and Marissa to discuss the nature of the universe itself, and from there to religion. After the American defeat in 1965, many American Catholics, including the therapist’s own family, had kept their faith even though the churches lost their tax exempt status and public gatherings had been curtailed by martial law. Like the Church of Latter Day Saints, Catholics withdrew from public political life following the Kennedy
Calamity, focusing on their own
communities. Unlike in the South, where only black congregations were exempt from the first amendment suspension, it wasn’t necessary for the National Guard to enforce the legislated secularism of the latter twentieth century in the Northern U.S.. People had just gotten better at hiding their beliefs. Marissa trusted Paul enough to share her testimony with him, and besides, it no longer really mattered, did it?

Dr. Jones had become increasingly concerned about the ability of the Apollo 11 module to carry an extra passenger back to Earth. His computer models about oxygen usage had shown the need to instruct Paul in how to quickly engineer an improved efficiency in the primitive spacecraft’s carbon dioxide

scrubbers that could be accomplished on the night of the 20th. It was that kind of attention to detail by the team that gave the Chief hope. Marissa was being just as obsessive about the target for change. She went over the alternatives with him during their private post-coital conferences, too. For one thing, a man claiming to be from the future couldn't be written off as a crackpot if he suddenly appeared on the moon, but the government could and in all likelihood would try to keep him under wraps until they figured out what to do with him, especially when they heard his story. Of course, he could always lie about the future, and the purpose of his mission. But once he got to Earth, he'd have to make his play, even if that meant another wormhole backwards, she went on to suggest. Paul was shocked at her cynicism. Having her religion forced underground must have made the Counselor paranoid. He wanted the device to be portable just in case she was right, but he felt sure that once they heard what awaited them in the future if they didn't avoid it, at least somebody in the
government would see reason.

Long after her breathing smoothed out into even snores Riley lay awake, thinking about being nine years old again, watching Neil Armstrong put his foot down and wave his hand at the camera. Soon he'd be shaking that hand, and the world he meant to save from itself. Marissa hadn't been born yet, and couldn't understand how important that moment had been for the bruised and battered nation's shaken morale. Black smoke had still hovered over the craters of Baltimore, Manhattan, and Philadelphia, and the Arlington near miss where the air defenses had shot down the second wave Soviet bombers and forced an early release of their deadly payload. It had been a mortal wound for the nation's capitol, anyway, but at least most of the monuments were still standing nearly a half century after Congress reestablished itself in St. Louis. Aside from the four million dead on the East Coast, thousands more had died when the Russian crews assigned to take out Detroit and Chicago had jettisoned their armed payloads early over the Midwest.

With a start, Paul suddenly remembered his mother thanking God that the missiles from Cuba pointed at Houston and Dallas and Washington had failed to make it to their intended targets in the first wave attack. As a child he'd wondered why she was happy that they'd had a chance to strike back at their enemy, when the Sunday School class teacher said to turn the other cheek.

The people in coastal New Orleans and the suburbs of Atlanta must have prayed hard, too, but it hadn't done them any good, or brought them back to life like Jesus' friend Lazarus when Havana stopped being any place where people still were. It had been the last time he had heard her pray out loud, or say she was happy that Murmansk and Severomorsk had died along with the Soviet fleet meant to unleash hell on the Capitalists. After the Armistice, most Americans were too ashamed to even pray for the new Soviet citizens under occupation in Paris, or the purged Vatican. Displays of Faith didn't have to be outlawed outright to become passé. It had been a limited nuclear war, but one with few heroes, nonetheless. Boys who grew up idolizing F-102
Interceptor pilots taking off from Elmendorf to crash their Delta Daggers into Tupolev bombers headed for Omaha and Colorado Springs once their missiles were all used up tended to become more than a little fatalistic as men. Especially as Vladivostok burned behind them, uselessly.

All of his life they'd been second best to the Commies since then, chasing behind them and trying to catch up, all but for that one shining moment that had been called "one small step for a man, but one giant leap for America". It was the perfect place to turn things around. Terri would just be starting kindergarten when he arrived. Would it derail History if he visited her and told her to say 'yes' when the man with the too-short hair asked her to dance at the Doors concert, even though she'd come with another date? It might save him a year of waiting for another chance, if he did. Maybe he could make a few bets on the Mets in game five, once he'd gotten the politicians straightened out. The Orioles would get it all back the next year, anyway, if he remembered right…if things still went that way, once he was finished. Yeah, then he could buy a new GTO and show up outside her parents' house where she would see him…but then, he'd just be some creepy old guy in a new car, wouldn't he, unless he gave it to his younger self, but that kind of self-contact was the kind of thing that Harris shrieked at him to avoid at all costs. Paradoxes, he called them. It was all pretty confusing. Maybe things would be clearer in the morning, he thought, drifting off at last to dream of muscle cars and air raid drills.

After the morning station meeting occupied with duty assignments for the next planting and processing of the new harvest, Col. Ritter stood waiting by

the door, his three soldiers behind him, for a private moment. Paul smiled and nodded to all four of them, acknowledging them as individuals, not as pawns in the officer's little army. It didn't go unnoticed, but like a shark, Ritter moved forward with the little speech he'd obviously prepared ahead of time.

"Acting Chief, it's my duty to advise you that if any station personnel, including the science department, are undergoing projects or research which might impact the security of this facility, I should be involved in every stage. You would keep me in the loop if there was anything I needed to know about, wouldn't you?" His smile showed no teeth, and didn't reach his eyes.

"Of course, Colonel, absolutely. And I've been submitting full reports to higher ups in NASA and the DOD, as well." Paul cheerfully replied, pumping Ritter's hand. They both knew that nobody down below was still reading any reports either of them submitted, and nobody above either of them still gave a damn what they did up here, if any such chain of command even still existed. They were on their own, and this was strictly between them. Paul shouldered past the Colonel and out the doorway towards Dr. Leslie's clinic. She'd asked him to meet her there to look at the results of some vitamin supplement experiments she'd been conducting. He guessed that she really wanted to ask him what the research team was up to, as well, she was just smart enough to be more subtle about it. The rest of the crew was chattering about the small bits of news he'd begun releasing to them each day, carefully filtered and spun for maximum positive morale and distraction. Electric power and rule of law had returned to the greater St. Louis area, and
"government" broadcasts had resumed locally. Soviet troops had withdrawn from Berlin with heavy losses. And most frightening to Ritter's cadre, the Russian base had sent a radio identification message directly to Luna One, and were awaiting our response. So, now they wanted to talk. He wondered what they had to say, and why Ritter wasn't insisting on having the final say about that, too. There was only one way to find out.

"How dare they!" Marissa fumed, pacing back and forth in the Chief's office. It wasn't a very long trip each way.

"Well, you heard them. They have fifty - three people and room for twice that number, with food and oxygen production resources to match. Surrender might be a better option than just opening the airlocks." Paul tried to put the

best face on it, but the request for consolidation of the two bases under Soviet command had been
condescending, at best. He was glad that he hadn't included Ritter in the conversation.

"I'd rather take my chances eating potatoes." She replied, sulkily. The therapist leaned back against the desk, shaking her head. At least she'd stopped stomping around.

"If, and I mean that, only If I don't change things enough, and the mission fails, or something, well, you might have to consider it. Even if you have to fight the Marines on it," he countered.

She wouldn't bend. "I might just join up with them, myself!" Paul heard her grumble under her breath, before she turned away from him and hissed out the door. He'd let her cool off some before bringing it up again. The real problem was that he took it for granted that Ritter had been listening in on the conversation, and was making plans of his own. Whatever they were going to do with the project, they'd better do soon.

From this side of the hangar where it had been set up, the wormhole aperture projected by the suitcase-sized device looked like a sideways tornado caught in freeze-frame, built of stars. They were looking into the wide mouth, which stretched from floor to ceiling, with no opposite end in sight. After several false starts, it was the best the technikies could do. Backpack sized was good enough, but the power usage was phenomenal. Even with a small nuclear battery. He'd have to recharge the vortex unit before each jump, somehow, Dr. Harris suggested, looking weak and gaunt from his high rad exposure. Jones and Henley, Harris's assistant, brought the rover through the airlock and into the hangar, parking it next to the shuttle where the other two Brits could fuel it up for his trip. It would be three hours across the lunar surface to the Apollo 11 landing site, alone.

Since their last conversation in his office Marissa had been cold and distant, but he still tried to plead with her to come with him, to back up his story and add her powers of persuasion to the effort he'd have to make once he got back to the past Earth. She wouldn't hear of it, insisting that somebody needed to keep things going here until the last possible moment, and that two

people going back instead of one would double the strain on the Apollo 11's command module during return, putting the mission at risk. It also would double the chance of paradoxes being created, she'd added, parroting Jones' repeated warnings. He finally gave up arguing with her and held her close one final time, instead.

The doors yawned open before the armored plexiglass cab window, while the rover rumbled into life. Six figures stood behind the hangar observation screen, transfixed by the moment. Paul shifted into forward and rolled out into the darkness, towards his destiny. Behind him Harris collapsed, held up by the two men on either side of him, his work done. Marissa kept her eyes on the lights of the vehicle until the doors slid back down, obscuring them from view. Only then did she begin to cry. When she stopped crying, she said a silent prayer for Paul, and for them all.

An hour into the relentless rolling up one shallow crater wall and down the other, the rover's radio screamed into life.

"Luna One Security to Rover, over." Paul ignored it. The message came again. "Luna One Security to Rover, respond. Over."

"Luna One Security to Rover, be advised that your unauthorized use of that vehicle endangers the safety of this base and its personnel. Return to base immediately, over." Five minutes passed before the next attempt. Col. Ritter's voice came through, this time.

"Luna One Security to Rover, Acting Chief Paul Riley, you are being ordered by the military authority of this station to return the stolen vehicle to base immediately. Your co-conspirators have been apprehended. Because of their resistance, two of them died while being detained. You can make sure that the surviving traitors remain safe by returning the vehicle immediately. Over."

Paul looked out over the endless expanse of gray dust and rock. Marissa. Harris. Jones. Henley. Smithe. Reed. Which of them had already died? How many would die, if he kept going? A momentary impulse to swing the wheels around crept up from the nape of his neck, but he pushed it under. Instead, he keyed the microphone.

“I’m sure the Russians are enjoying listening to your displays of weakness, Colonel. Good luck with that,” he snarled.

“Now Riley, you listen to me, get that rover back here ASAP or…” Paul muted the speaker and for the first time in a very, very long time, said a prayer for Marissa and the scientists, and for what he was about to try to do. In just a little while a blob of white on the horizon clarified into the Lunar Module left behind so long ago. Then the Lunar Laser Ranging Retroreflector and its discarded cover came into view, followed by the Passive Seismic Experiment Package. In his mind, he had imagined seeing the flag first, but it had apparently fallen over, slowly. That somehow seemed more appropriate. He pulled the rover behind a bedrock outcrop and turned the heater down, selecting an audio track from the memory to listen to while he waited. They should be there in about two hours, or so, back then. He’d exit the rover and bring the wormhole vortex spinner online when it was a little closer to 20:18. He closed his eyes, and thought of Terri as the first chords of his favorite old Tea Set song began.

“So, so you think you can tell
Heaven from Hell, blue skies from pain. Can you tell a green field from a cold steel rail?
A smile from a veil?
Do you think you can tell?
Did they get you to trade your heroes for ghosts?
Hot ashes for trees?
Hot air for a cool breeze?
Cold comfort for change?
Did you exchange a walk on part in the war for a lead role in a cage?
How I wish, how I wish you were here. We're just two lost souls swimming in a fish bowl, year after year,
Running over the same old ground.
What have we found?
The same old fears.
Wish you were here…”

Timeline B: Michael Collins watched in secret envy as the other two men descended towards the Sea of Tranquility. The Lunar Module had detached

from the Command Module smoothly only minutes ago. Every stage of the mission completed safely was a victory for the astronauts, and the program, not to mention a shattered nation.

Throughout the descent Aldrin called out navigation data to Armstrong, who was busy piloting the lunar module. A few moments before the landing, a light informed Aldrin that at least one of the 67-inch (170 cm) probes hanging from *Eagle'*s footpads had touched the surface, and he said "Contact light!" Three seconds later, *Eagle* landed and Armstrong said "Shutdown." Aldrin immediately said "Okay, engine stop. ACA
– out of detent." Armstrong acknowledged "Out of detent. Auto." and Aldrin continued "Mode control – both auto. Descent engine command override off. Engine arm – off. 413 is in."

The nervous Charles Duke, in charge at Mission Control during the landing phase, acknowledged their landing by saying "We copy you down, Eagle." Maybe they were miles west of where they were supposed to be, but they were down in one piece. His first loyalty to the command module, Neil spoke directly to Michael. Along with the rest of the world rebroadcast to through Houston, Collins heard the announcement, “Columbia, Tranquility Base here, the Eagle has landed,” and breathed a sigh of relief. Sputnik be damned, and after the disgrace of four years earlier, America had finally earned some respect, again. They had gotten here first.

Timeline C: Buzz Aldrin’s first thought was “How the Hell did they get here first?”, when he saw the strangely space-suited figure bouncing towards the lunar module through the narrow ob slit. Those damn Russian bastards had beaten them again! But where was their craft? All he could see behind the interloper was a strange dust cloud. There weren’t supposed to be any storms on the moon. How could there be? He tapped Neil on the shoulder, pointing. Before NASA admin could cut the video feed viewers around the world saw a few seconds of somebody already outside the lunar module, six hours before the planned walk, and heard Armstrong declare “Houston, we have a problem.”

After a hurried consultation, the walk happened ahead of schedule, while Paul waited patiently outside. It took him a few minutes to think of trying his radio, to see if the frequencies would match. He scanned through them,

before hearing Mission Control's feedback in his ear, and the response from the open door.

"Yes, Houston, that is affirmat ive, there does appear to be a U.S. flag on his helmet. He is wearing some kind of jetpack and is alone. No, there is no craft in sight, Houston, over." Riley tongued his mic.

"Hi, Commander Armstrong, Sir, just wanted to remind you, to say "That's one small step for a man, but one giant leap for America", when you step down off the ladder, Sir," he offered, helpfully. The audio erupted as a dozen voices back in Houston shouted at once.

"Who the blue blazes was that? Who's on this channel? Wait, wait, was that HIM!?!"
Neil chuckled. "Yeah, that's a pretty good line, why didn't I think of that?"

Charlie Duke's voice cut in. "Eagle, initiate protocol 'Hitchhiker'." The top secret plans to bring back a passenger from the moon had been mysteriously created in the first days of the Apollo program, inspired by shadowy operatives who had shown up unannounced and presented such compelling evidence of their inside knowledge of the program that their contingency plans were taken seriously at the highest levels.

For the lunar module, two down and three up equaled a five-fourth overload, so the rock and dust sampling was curtailed. It took Paul a little over an hour and a half to upengineer the lunar module's carbon dioxide scrubbers, while Aldrin and Armstrong hurriedly finished setting up the LLRR and PSEP. Then they relayed instructions to Collins in the Command Module on how to do the same there for the longer trip back with an extra passenger. Three outbound and four inbound
represented a seven-sixth overload, but for a much longer trip. Convincing them to let him touch anything had been the hard part. Buzz wasn't quite sure that he wasn't really a Russian spy, just yet. Paul couldn't blame him, though. After that, they didn't have any choice but to bring him back. How could they leave him behind, whoever or whatever he was? Orders were orders.

After an emergency call from President Kennedy's bunker, the broadcast announcer, NASA Director of Communications Jack King, effusively

congratulated the early moonwalk and “first images of a man on the moon, an American man”. In later years, however, the few frames of out of sequence video would be used by conspiracy theorists to claim that the entire lunar landing had been a Hollywood hoax.

The Apollo 11 astronauts were under strict orders from Duke not to talk to their unscheduled passenger at all during their long ride home. Armstrong silently oversaw the recalibrations Collins had begun. On Earth atmospheric pressure is 14.7 lbs. per square inch, while Columbia’s was 3.5 lbs. per square inch of pure oxygen, a 4.2 times reduction in pressure. At 4.2 times the 20% of air that oxygen normally makes up, that equaled 80% oxygen, more than enough volume for four. The wiggle room was built in, as far as their ‘Hitchhiker’ being able to breathe was concerned. They shared their extra rations and water cordially, but without unnecessary comment. Paul slept most of the time, or pretended to, after the first twelve hours without any response to his prepared statement. Aldrin and
Armstrong had brought the two ‘man-slings’ from the lunar module aboard Columbia with them so their guest could endure the gforces of Earth reentry without having to lay on the floor. The unsecured lift-off from the moon’s surface in the lunar module had left him with bruised ribs and a throbbing headache. It was an awkward silence during the return, except for the checklists. Despite the unbelievable story he’d repeated over and over with little variation, all three of them pretended to ignore him as much as they could, pressed together in the module. Neil did give him a grin and a thumbs up as they strapped down, and Buzz broke official protocol by saying a prayer for a safe return.

Following Pacific splashdown they were thoroughly debriefed and sworn to secrecy while he was picked up by a separate Helicopter and whisked off for interrogation. Aldrin joked that the spaceman was
probably going to be dissected for
experiments. Then they agreed not to discuss the incident any more, ever again, to anybody. They took his story to their graves. That ended up not being quite as far as they had hoped. Confined exposure to an active radiation source during the return had given everybody in the Columbia long-term lethal doses, including their fourth passenger. After a year and a half serving his tour of duty and beyond on Luna, the reduced gravity had taken a toll in

muscle and bone loss, too, but aside from slightly elevated risks of cancer or DNA mutations from nuclear exposure, the navy doctor gave Paul a clean bill of health upon the initial examination. His psychological diagnosis was less conclusive.

Being questioned while sick to his stomach from the rads and weak as a kitten from muscle atrophy made Paul question the reality of where and when he was. At first they were polite, if not deferential. He kept asking the different shifts of government agents what date it was, who was President, and when he could speak to him. They kept repeating the same questions, too. Who was he? How had he gotten to the moon? Where was his craft? How many others were there? How long had the Russians been there? What was the jetpack he'd had used for? They took blood and tissue samples and hair samples and gave him sodium pentathol and polygraph tests in exchange. Then they became less cordial. The offers of cokes and cigarettes ended.

It took four days before the cramps stopped, and he still couldn't walk straight on his own from one wall of his cell to the other. There was just enough light in the stainless steel room to see that the suit was frayed at the cuffs, a strange detail to latch onto, but something real, at least. A shadow moved closer.

"I believe your craft slung around and landed on the dark side of the moon. You are building a base there, aren't you? There's a Commie base on the dark side of the moon!" This F.B.I. agent was decidedly unfriendly.

Maybe J. Edgar Hoover himself would come and talk to him, next. He thought the legend was still the head honcho over there. That made him smile, but his lips split again from the effort, and he tasted blood. A wild phrase came to Paul, "And I'd have gotten away with it, too, if it hadn't been for you meddling kids and that dog of yours!" From the paling of the agent's face, he must have said it out loud.

"What? What do you mean by that? What dog? Are you talking in code about Sputnik?" The voice was right above him, then in his ear. It all seemed so familiar, just like a dream he'd had one time. He must have forgotten it and just now pulled it up from the memory hole. What a time to be wool-gathering. Wool-gathering, counting sheep. If he could just go back to sleep

and dream it again, Paul knew he could dream it right, this time, and not wake up until this was all over.

“Have you ever wondered w hat things might have been like if we’d won the war? Or if there hadn’t been a war at all?” Maybe the government man had some answers.

“Are you saying you have a base in Europe? Or in one of the dead zones here? Now is the time to confess, and we can help you out. Give you leniency. Maybe even political asylum. We can protect you. Give you a new life. Would you like to defect? Become an American?” The voice became a shade nicer and more pleasant. Downright reasonable, this guy was, again.

“Where do you think the seven million American souls went that night? The same place as the million Russian ones and half million Cubans?” It seemed a reasonable question, too. One he’d wondered about a lot, up there.

“Is that more code? What are you trying to tell me? Guard! Did the x-rays show anything that was unusual? Anything that might be a transmitting device, or a surgical implant?”

Paul tried to tell his story again, but the lights went out somewhere around the turn of the century.

He had no idea after the initial sedation where he was being held, but the klaxons which began in the middle of the night several days after his arrival caused him to sit upright against his restraints. Running, booted feet on concrete. Yells of confusion. Shots. The clang of metal on metal. Rough arms cutting him free of the bunk, then a bag going over his head. ‘What a long ride to take just to be disappeared’, he thought. ‘And I never even got to tell my story to the President’.

Jack Kennedy was livid. He knew it had been a mistake to end martial law in time for last year’s elections. He should have stayed on for a third term, and kept a firmer grip on things. But Congress wouldn’t support a Catholic President ever being elected again, or any other open Christian, for that matter. No matter how he rigged the ballot boxes, this time. And now their Russian spy with his nuclear gadget he’d been lucky enough to capture on the

moon had escaped, with the help of outsiders. Probably Commie sleeper agents. He'd been woken up for the news, and had the Secret Service usher Miss Welch out the back way before calling in his brother and Kissinger. Now Bobby was urging him to seal the borders and ground all the outgoing flights, and the toadlike Jew was insisting that the surviving guards were mistaken, the Mossad could not have been involved, Israel was his closest friend and ally. He was still slightly drunk and didn't know who to believe. It was a good thing he could finally get some rest in a few months, he thought, in sheer exhaustion.

Little brother was saying that there also had been a break-in at Bell Labs, and the jetpack the moon-man had been wearing was missing. Probably it was related. Well, no shit. The high-paid fancy titled scientists there hadn't given him much news on it, anyway, except that they had drawings of a similar model from years before, whatever that was supposed to mean. He needed a nerve pill, and a good stiff drink to wash it down. First he was the President who lost World War Three, and now he'd lost the first man from space. Maybe that crazy governor from Alabama would mess things up even worse, and people would forget. He hoped so.

He'd had to read the full Naval Research Laboratory report upon entering office. How the radar used first to measure the Earth to Moon difference had detected anomalies in the return signal a few years before, in 1957. The next year the Royal Radar
Establishment in England had confirmed that the signal was not just a radar pulse coming from the moon, but artificial in origin, carrying a digital message that still hadn't been deciphered. Even so, it had been enough to get him to take the lobbyists who'd visited him in April of '61 with specific knowledge of embarrassing personal details about his life seriously when they'd 'requested' he announce a manned mission to the moon. Honestly, he wouldn't have needed the mysterious radar signal to be convinced to do whatever they asked. The President just never had understood how the Russians could hope to benefit from it. The Apollo program, that is.

The trail went back further than that, though. NASA Deputy Administrator Hugh Dryden had been approached by an exotic foreign-sounding woman in a bar during a Space Task Group conference in July of 1960, who fed him the

germinating seeds of the Hitchhiker protocol over that weekend. Then the visitors in 1963 who told them things about the developing program nobody should know outside NASA managers had helped kill the idea of a joint U.S./Soviet moon mission he had been toying with, secretly. But the war would have settled that, anyway. It almost ended the Apollo mission completely. Only the imposition of martial law in the aftermath had allowed him to continue to fund it. People had screamed about fortunes being spent on science fiction while millions of dead Americans lay unburied. They'd found themselves in prison for sedition. Some of them were still there, locked up safe and sound. Now, the guy the astronauts had picked up, wasn't. Jack was glad that his dad was still around to tell him what to do. He'd have the White House Secretary get him on the phone.

Because of being hit with the second and third injections of sedatives in a week, Paul was still groggy some time later when he heard voices speaking German…no, not exactly German…but something close. The hood was still over his head, but he could breathe through it. At some point he had peed himself, if not worse…yeah, worse, too. But at least he was still alive, for some as yet undetermined reason. He was upright, and found himself strapped in a chair. Oh, goody. He took as deep a breath as the hood would allow, and began his story again, for whoever was listening.

Wham! Something struck him in the stomach, driving the wind from him. If he'd had anything to eat in the last day or two, he would have vomited. Instead he dry heaved and gagged, his mouth too dry to swallow any saliva. Maybe he would just sit here quietly for a while, then, and see what might happen.

Water splashed in his face, awakening him again, warm but welcome, some trickling through the hood onto his lips. He took the fabric into his mouth and sucked greedily. It was the best thing he'd ever tasted.

"If you are Paul Riley, or somebody else, it does not matter. We do not care about you. Whether you live or die, Goy, means nothing. We will not ask who you are or how you got there, because all that we care about is the time portal. Where did you get it?"

So, whoever they were, they knew what his 'jetpack' was, that was

interesting. The U.S. government didn't seem to. And that accent…slightly nasally, whiny, with a Brooklyn twang. But they weren't
American. Were they? A wave of dizziness unrelated to his dehydration and exhaustion washed over Paul. It didn't feel like the medication wearing off. It felt like he had heard the same voice, the same words, somehow, before. He just couldn't quite remember exactly where or when. Maybe it would come to him. He tried to pay attention through the haze, to see if he could recall what was just scratching at the back of his mind to get in. The voice was still rambling…

"When our sources delivered
photographs and specs of your portal, our intelligence analysts recognized some of the technical components immediately, based on their presumed functionality. You see, it obviously is based on some of our own research into the same field. More advanced, of course, but along similar lines. But portable! That's the amazing part." The unseen voice continued. "You see, Gentile, we have been working on our own time travel device, designed to be portable too, and allow patriotic agents to travel back to Hitler's childhood and murder him as an infant. Does that shock you, goy? Too bad I can't see your face to know. Well. Two years ago, the attack on the meddling American ship, the U.S.S. Liberty, was necessary to keep you…you ARE an American, somehow and some-WHEN, aren't you?... from discovering our secret floating research laboratory for the project. Now, the prototype has been completed, and is ready for testing. We were …shocked that someone had beaten us to the invention, even in the future. Of course we have no reason to doubt your story about the future, but it really doesn't matter, because we will change the past, and make a new future. A future for our people, and no others. Now, what do you think of that, goy?"

"I think you don't know when to shut up, just like a typical Jew," Paul rasped, turning his covered head towards the voice. It came out of his mouth before he could even consciously think it, in a single breath. That wasn't like him. Was it? He drove on… "And I think you'd be lost without the Holocaust to wring guilt and money out of. You wouldn't even have your country, without Hitler, would you? Did you ever think of that?" Well, at least if they killed him now, it would all be over. He was just so sick and tired of nobody listening. But the interrogator barely seemed to change his tone at all.

“True, some among us have voiced suc h concerns, but it seems like a chance worth taking, to the majority. I think it matters more to other Jews than to ourselves and our parents and grandparents, here where it has already happened, but what do I know? I’m just a poor government cop. I can’t even catch a criminal who keeps coming back to the scene of the crime, over and over.” The agent paused for a moment, staring at Paul intently. “So, what we need from you, what your life depends on, is help with the making of it portable. You will tell us everything you know, sooner or later. We have your portal device, and we have you. And we also have, in endless supply, all of the time in the world,” the shrill voice giggled at his own joke as he moved away, closing a door behind him. The footsteps of another man approached the door, and low voices murmured together. Paul passed out once more, wondering what Terri was doing here in this time, and whether Marissa still existed in another.

Timeline B: Mindy thought Francesca’s descriptions of the werewolf pack were too scary, and wanted ‘her’ to rewrite the whole closing of Chapter One. Really. Paul thoughtfully considered how funny it would be to let the new agent know what
everybody else at Trident already was in on, that HE was the author, damn it. Maybe that would get him a little more respect over the phone, at least. But holding something back, having a secret to keep from her, was like having some power over the woman complaining about his creative work every day. It also made her look stupid to her colleagues, which was humorous to imagine for him. So, he kept his mouth shut and pushed the weird stuff he’d been
daydreaming about before the phone rang from his mind. Blue over three perfectly good paragraphs and backspace, then. Start over.

“Gnasher, the alpha of the roving pack, had sent all of his sons into exile long before, ere they challenge his leadership and dethrone the aging monarch. The gray on his snout bore the fine scars of many battles, and on the cold dew-strewn mornings his back haunches ached with every loping step. Each fullness of the moon took more and more virility out of him, until his other self dreaded the coming monthly shift like death itself.

That other self, Gelkarth the Old, lived a double life, as did all of his pack.

For years the Wood-Elves cursed by the fallen sorcerer's last breath with lycanthropic agony had kept their affliction hidden, running the isolated outer ranges of the hills far from their brothers and sisters of the forest's keen eyes. Now their secret was threatened by those rogue males he had driven beyond his control, who hunted the young and old, the alone and defenseless, and slew them when the moon was rounded. No trace was left of the slain elven folk, but the howls of their murderers had been heard in the night, and Queen Gandelon herself had sworn vengeance on the wolves. All of them. Even the innocent.

If Gnasher could not hunt down and bring his whelps to bay, she would, and the rest of his pack would die with the lone wolves. Each moon he had one night to chase his sons, before Gelkarth returned. Time was fleeting as his paws along the fern-laden paths. How could he save his pack before it was too late? How could he slay his own? A low growl emerged unbidden from his throat at the thought, echoing into the night."

He'd been about to type something about the werewolf remembering the taste of old blood, but one of the muses, as he called them, the sudden impulse moments where what he was about to write intermingled with what he ended up writing in his mind until they resolved themselves, intervened. That would be too gory. Mindy didn't want gory. She wanted flowers and unicorns.

Paul had thought about writing from the perspective of a werewolf trapped by the elves, and being tortured by them. Poked with sticks, maybe, but that didn't sound like a very elven thing to do. Then he had thought about jumping back and forth in time, to tell the story of how the defeated sorcerer had cursed the firstborn of the forest folk originally, and how their pack life had developed. Maybe he still would. That felt like a good approach. Maybe not one that Francesca normally would use, but he felt like it was time for change. It was embarrassing having to go to conferences and conventions posing as his own agent. He never got to give autographs or deliver speeches at aspiring writer's seminars. Paul imagined a line of women stretched back in front of his table, waiting patiently for him to sign their copy of his latest Gossamer Woods installment, each of them better looking than the one before. Or maybe he'd branch out into something different. He had always wanted to write a spy novel. That was where the real market niche was for a

guy like himself.

Okay, so Mindy didn't want the
werewolves to be too frightening.
Sympathetic killers, they were supposed to be, apparently. Hell, why didn't he just name one of them Jacob, and be done with it, then. A pack of shirtless, hairy chested lapdogs, skipping through the trees. Maybe the elves could adopt them all as pets, would she like that? There's some conflict
resolution for ya, ya stupid wench. 'Wench' was what his mom had always called the girls he brought home to meet her, after they left, of course. It was, had been, her polite way of saying something far worse. Mom had always been polite. It wasn't as if too many girls had their feelings hurt, any way , because there had never been that many of them he'd brought home, to start with. Outside a storm beat fat raindrops against the glass of his window, making Paul think of the tossing and turning he'd been doing all night, dreaming of tornadoes and stranger things. Maybe he should go to the doctor.

His mom had always told him that he needed to take better care of his health. "You have to take care of yourself, Paulie", she'd say. "I won't be around forever to look after you". Like usual, mom had been right.

He didn't really want to see a s hrink though, just a regular doctor. Maybe Dr. Leslie could work him in without an appointment?
Chapter Three

Matthew Ch. 14, King James Version:

" 22 And straightway Jesus constrained his disciples to get into a ship, and to go before him unto the other side, while he sent the multitudes away.

23 And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone.

24But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves: for the wind was contrary.

25And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea.

26 And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear.

27But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid."

Timeline C: It was the next day, or one exactly the same as it, just after he'd been given a bowl of thin soup again to slurp up by lowering his face into it like a dog, that he cramped up. At first he thought they'd poisoned him, but finally the pain resolved itself into a dizzying sense of coming home and finding the door locked. Almost there. The taste, the cool cement floor, the ache in his shoulders and elbows, all seemed like he knew what was coming next, except he didn't. If there had been anybody there to talk to him he would have said that he knew they were going to say that, but he knew he would have been a half beat too late for it to sound true. They would think he was faking it. Who would believe him? Nobody believed him, nobody listened to his story, or if they listened they didn't care. They'd even said so. So, why should he? Why should he? Why should he care about a world that wanted to kill itself and a past that wasn't even his own any more, since he'd changed it just by being in it?

He had heard the click of the door latching behind the beaknosed guard who'd brought the soup as he left in a hurry, answering a shout of frustration from above and down the hall. Hadn't he? Had he come back and left again? Because there was a crack. A sliver of silver. Light between the frame and the door. It hadn't clicked after all. Had he just imagined it, his brain feeding in the missing sound he'd heard so many times before in the same sequence? There had been a click. Whether it had been in his head or in the door didn't seem to matter. He closed his eyes gain and prayed for clarity.

If he could just stand up, he could probably hobble over to it and push the door shut the rest of the way, and be sure that it closed, this time. Put his shoulder against it. Get that satisfying click of reassurance and safety, that he was okay. No, wait, that wasn't right. Think. Slow down. Discipline was remembering what it was that he really wanted. Somebody had told him that once, somebody long dead or yet to be born. Either way. True, they might be mad at him if he left without permission. What if he got caught trying to leave? They'd be angry. Disappointed in him. He would let them down. Down to Earth. That was why he had come. To shake people up. Seeking to save that which was lost with a message of salvation? Was that his job? Okay, then. He'd keep telling it, until somebody listened.

Paul arched his back, hearing it pop, not click, and got his feet under him.

Lunging up to stand, he stopped when the legs straightened beneath himself and stepped backwards against the wall, letting blood and feeling return to them. Tingling and burning and warmth. His sore elbows flexed and raised above the folded metal chair that had flattened out closed and come up with him. One, two, three sharp downhard chops behind his back, and the zipties broke, their teeth stripping. Numb fingers rose to fumble with the cinch of the hood. The light hurt his eyes. This was all going to take some getting used to. There was the bowl on the floor. There was the light at the door. Quietly he eased his fingers into the gap and widened it. Something tugged at his mind again. He looked at the door. Then he went back for the bowl, and stomped on it.

The guard in the open cubicle at the end of the row of cells was still daydreaming about a strip club in Tel Aviv where Ukrainian girls were sold into service when the jagged edge of porcelain stabbed into the side of his neck and was jerked down, breaking off in the muscle behind the artery that had been torn in two. He was pulled backwards off the stool to kick against the control panel buttons above, unlocking and relocking and unlocking the other cells. Three or four very hard-eyed and vengeful men slipped out of them and passed Paul by while he held the dying soldier down, shushing him gently in the spreading pool of blood.

Alarms had drawn the guards away from the research laboratory adjacent to the prison. Paul couldn't read Hebrew, but he didn't need a sign to find the right place. The sound of the vortex drew him like a siren's song. The Israelis had figured out how to turn the machine on, then, and were changing the past to suit their own
ends…but it wasn't his past, obviously, so it wasn't his present. He didn't have time to ponder the complexities of alternate universes at the moment, he was too busy shooting the two white-coated lab rats who looked up in shock when he came through the sterile airlock pointing the dead guard's Uzi at them. It felt good. They deserved it, touching his baby. The cancers growing inside him grinned. A spray of bullets into the open wormhole, just for them to enjoy downtime, whenever they were. He hoped it caught them in the back while they were trying to change history.

Dr. Harris had shown him more than once how to power the vortex device

up, and how to power it back down again. That was the easy part, and the pack was still attached to the laboratory's power grid, so it
remained fully charged. He uncoupled the cable and opened the protective cover for the data input, to change the more
complicated settings, the wormhole
placement. That was how a date for the target landing was established. Paul wished that it was more accurate, or easier to verify what had been keyed in, before taking a leap into the past. It was a one way trip, after all. The Israelis must have found a volunteer, or more than one, zealous enough to jump in to the timestream. He hoped they failed, for that universe's sake.

The tachyon vortex projector was designed to extend above the back of his head like a floodlight from the backpack sized device, so it had to be adjusted correctly before it was initiated and the wormhole entered. Otherwise, the entrance would precede elusively before him, as unattainable as Tantalus's grapes. He'd gotten it right the first jump, he just needed to be careful each time. One mistake was all it would take to end the mission, and himself.

Whenever he jumped, he would still be here, so he quickly set a date for a week earlier. He needed to get out of the country, and back to the U.S.. After his kidnapping, it made sense that security on international flights would have been tightened. The Mossad must have brought him back either on their own plane, or a ship. Whichever it was, he needed to skip back until he could find out when they had left to get him, and hitch a ride. Hey, it would be fun. Just like in the pirate days. What could possibly go wrong? Easey-Peasey. Paul pulled the straps of the pack over his shoulders, ran out the front doors, and hit the vortex engage button just as a group of guards standing over two detained escapees caught sight of him from down the hill. The wormhole spun into shape in front of him, and for the second time he thought "Flowers on the razor wire, don't be afraid, just walk on in".

Timeline D: His boots disappeared in the starlight, which crept up his shins to his thighs as he stepped forward, willing his eyes to stay open this time, to see what was happening, but the blinding glare flashed and subsided into darkness, pulling him through into night. Paul blinked a few times, and registered the tower's searchlight piercing the blackness, sweeping left to right, right to left, along the prison wall. Getting his bearings, he powered

down the vortex, then walked down the hill towards the prison, hoping the brief light show hadn't been noticed. The only way that he knew to tell how far back to jump was through trial and error. The nuclear battery might power two or three very brief jumps of very short distances before it had to be recharged, but he didn't want to push his luck.

Pressed against the wall of the gateway to the cell block, he watched in amusement as the guard he'd brutally killed just a few minutes earlier sat with his back to the exit, listening intently to the Mossad interrogator berate the prisoner down the hall. Paul strained his ears, too, and caught a bit of the exchange: "…Of course we have no reason to doubt your story about the future, but it really doesn't matter, because we will change the past, and make a new future…"

He'd never liked the sound of his own voice, even on recordings, so he didn't stick around to listen to the response. One turn of the smallest dial equaled a day. Even as he twisted it he felt a panicking surge of knowledge that he'd done that before and something bad was about to happen, so he quickly engaged the vortex and hopped through the wormhole, a day before. From one night to the previous, he traveled.

Timelines D-O: The battery level indicator had barely dropped, so his theory about the shorter and faster jumps using less juice must be correct. Even so, with his fifth jump he broke into the lab and almost got caught trying to recharge the vortex device from their grid. With his sixth jump he got the battery to maximum capacity again. Each jump left him more disoriented, or maybe it was the continued radiation exposure. Moving around and small jumps got him to the day before the snatch team had left to grab him. Then to the location of the ship they'd take. Then aboard, and to a hold with power and water. The Captain reported several small power surges onboard throughout their clandestine voyage, but the ship arrived safely and returned, their mission accomplished, two weeks later.

As far as he could tell, this America seemed the same as his own. Maybe the ripple effects caused by his arrival hadn't had time to make butterfly effect changes like the chaos theory Jones had espoused predicted. Paul pondered time and space while he scavenged the garbage bins dockside. Now that the ship had gone again, carrying the dark bundle he assumed was himself he'd

seen being loaded by the tired agents, he was free again. At least, HE was free again because he was HERE and NOW. It wasn't something he could stand to think about for too long. Priorities. He found a big rucksack some sailor had discarded and adopted it as his backpack cover, to blend in with the other vagrants and hippies traveling the highways. Now, he just had to decide where to go and what to do.

The crackly old black and white t.v. ominously occupying a corner of the Y.M.C.A. homeless shelter was showing the evening weather report, so a crowd of itinerant laborers thronged around it, waiting for the residual fallout forecast for the next day. The continuing national depression meant that whatever the dosage prediction was, those who were lucky enough to have a job would have to venture out into it, regardless. Like Paul, they only watched out of a sense of morbid curiosity. There were too many of them for him to crash
overnight, all of the beds were taken, but he had been allowed to sleep for four hours while they were gone on their day shift and then take a shower before the evening meal, when he'd have to go. It looked like prevailing winds from the west would be pushing the gritty fine debris out over the Atlantic instead of down the eastern seaboard, but he still planned on walking inland.

Every day and each night, no matter where he went, he told his story. His hair and beard had grown out, then fallen out in clumps, and with his backpack and wildeyed crazy tales of the future, Paul fit right in with the half insane wanderers churned up by the war to float along the surface of the counterculture. In the southern Virginia Peace Camps and Live-Ins, he became known as the Prophet. Many of the younger folks were afraid of him, but too much in love with love to show it. They fed him and listened to him talk about moon bases and global collapses and time travel, and treated his fevers and vomiting sickness as best they could with a variety of home remedies and recreational drugs. That only made the Prophet and his stories stranger.

Moon Daughter stared across the fire at the crazy man. His skin was blotchy and marred by eruptions, his throat looked swollen on the side facing the wide

backpack strap digging into it, and he had bald patches in his scruffy beard. There were a lot of strange characters in camp this weekend, more than usual, but this one they called the Prophet was the scariest of all. She didn't fear him dragging her off into the bushes like she did some of the brothers from other mothers who preyed on free love girls. It was a more a feeling that he really didn't belong there. It took one to know one. She'd grown up in Fairfax County. For the last four years she'd been hovering
downstate, waiting for the government to issue an all clear for Alexandria. Her plan was to go back home and see what was left in her old room that she could salvage, and bury her parents, if they had been home when the cloud had swallowed their neighborhood. Sometimes she dreamed that instead of being away at school, she'd stayed home sick that day, and died with them. All it would have taken is a sore throat, and mommy would have let her.

She did what she could, what she had to do, to survive. The chaos of the evacuations had subsided into the strictly regulated day to day life in the unaccompanied minor's refugee camp, before she'd turned eighteen last summer and been evicted. Now she preferred the company of the hippies and yippies and atomic children like herself, orphans of the apocalypse. They survived on government handouts, church charities who used food distributions as an excuse to hold secret worship services contrary to the rules, and what little they could grow themselves. They got by. They even had a culture of their own, based on emerging myths and legends from before the war. None of them had ever heard a story like the one the old sick guy was spinning, though. Rude Dog watched her watching the Prophet, and she felt herself blush, knowing he'd gotten the wrong idea. He'd make her pay for that, later on tonight.

Paul caught the exchanged looks, and felt embarrassed. He was too old to get that kind of attention from young girls, no matter how hard times were. It was flattering, though, he thought, as he told his tale of future woe to match the past. The camps were so dirty and poor and depressing, he wanted so much to give them a message of hope and promise, but all he could offer them was a warning that things could get even worse, and had. No matter how hungry, filthy, tired, or sick he was, the worst day on Earth was still better than the best day on the moon. The tastes and smells he'd missed, and the weather… he loved the rain…were welcome old friends. Space really smelled like

burning metal.

One late autumn morning he woke up alongside the road after being dropped off by a Volkswagon bus full of musicians headed for California with a desperate impulse to get out of the ditch. Climbing up the embankment which looked a lot like one he'd seen somewhere before, Paul found a green duffel bag full of bottled water, aspirin, antacid, protein bars, potassium iodide, and a bundle of cash in small bills. It was just laying there, amid fresh footprints. He looked up and down the road, but nobody was in sight. Shrugging to himself, he remembered what the potassium iodide was for, and soon felt better. The money was enough to buy him a week in a cheap motel, some new clothes, and a bus ticket. Life was good, he thought. God had given him a message to spread, and provided sustenance for the work of reaching people with the gospel.

Timeline P: Staying in one place for several days in a row had been a mistake. A strange sense of foreboding had been nagging at Paul for the last few weeks, like a feeling of being followed, but not quite. The rested and logical corner of his mind attributed this to a figment of the messiah complex he was laboring under, a
martyrdom and persecution feeling not uncommon in these kinds of delusions. The freer part of his brain admitted that his story and his sixth sense were both correct. He came back to his motel room with a fresh haircut to find the place ransacked. The vortex device was still safely hidden inside the air conditioning unit he'd gutted, fully charged, so he jumped back to the night before and sat waiting in the darkness until he got up to use the bathroom like he'd remembered doing, then slipped out and squeezed in behind the cinderblock retaining wall until he left.

Sure enough, within minutes a wormhole appeared. It looked less spectacular from the destination end, somehow, or maybe he was growing jaded with it. This was the first time Paul'd seen what things looked like when people emerged. They were walking out of a fog. There were two of them, one of whom he recognized from the second prison. It was an agent who'd laughed at him while he'd lapped up his soup. The memory made him angry, but more than anything else he felt a great sense of relief that his thoughts and prophecies had been validated. They weren't really prophecies, then, were

they? They were memories. His memories. His past. His self. The room door opened easily, they must have gone back to get a key so they wouldn't have to kick it in and make a scene. After a few minutes they came back out, looking frustrated, and talked animatedly for a minute. Fascinated, Paul watched them open a briefcase the darker one carried to match their business suits, and play around with something inside. In front of them a vortex swirled into place. He felt a mad impulse to rush out and follow them through it, but then he realized that he had no idea when they were going. They were chasing him through time, obviously, though, so taking a jump with them would only be the right move if he became so tired of the game that he wanted to end it all. He took note of the date, just in case he ever reached that point. No, let them go, for now. He had a bus to catch, or would.

As a beaten up old Greyhound carried him and a half load of black reparations pensioners east on I-40 through Tennessee, Paul thought about the implications of this latest development, and how it affected his mission. The size of the vortex projector they'd used indicated that the Mossad agents, if that was who they really were, probably had come from the distant future. A distant future, anyway, if they were able to cross timelines, which he wasn't sure about. Harris had seemed unclear on that one. So, the one man he had seen in the past must have jumped there after coming here, which meant that to that point, at least, they'd been unsuccessful in stopping him. He meant to keep it that way. The creaking of the rusted bus chassis lulled him to sleep, exhaustion from the radiation sickness sapping his strength and his consciousness into oblivion despite the loud chatter of the other passengers going on around him.

Time after time, the man sitting hunched at the bar kept telling himself how lucky he was to have even gotten home. The crosscountry trip through military roadblocks and local militia lines mustered up to fight off an invasion that never came had taken all of his charm and fame to bluff past. By the time he'd gotten from California to Memphis his fingers were blistered from giving
autographs and shaking hands. Their caravan had abandoned three vehicles due to the difficulties of finding gas as emergency rationing began, so they'd limped back into town packed in like sardines, shoulder to shoulder. Still, every member of his mafia and their women had made it, and they were all

camped out at his place, four years later. It was a shame that the Colonel had insisted on staying in Hollywood to keep the movie contracts open. No heroic war film role had ever materialized because people knew the war too well, and the wounds from it were still too fresh and deep. They probably always would be, his former manager's letter had admitted, months ago. But they were making happy movies again, and if he would come back, it was a sure thing that he could get a juicy role in a musical number. Everybody loved nostalgia. They hadn't forgotten him, at the top.

It would never be, though. He might never say so, but the war was the best thing that had ever happened to him. Coming home and marrying Priscilla and having a son and a daughter with her, and spending time with his dad, had cleared his head and brought him back down to Earth. The visions that had begun haunting him at night as the East Coast had died had become old friends, and his best source of new material. Playing local gigs three or four nights a week paid the bills at Graceland and gave him a break from the kids, as much as he loved them. The bus station next door brought in a steady stream of new customers and a new audience each night. Most of them still treated him like he used to be somebody famous. Some even bought copies of his newest record that the local Sun studio was pressing in a limited release, now that marital law had been rescinded and the first amendment was reinstated.

The lousy comedian on stage warming up the crowd for him kept his hands in his pockets and telegraphed his punch lines with big shoulder shrugs. J.W. Carson wasn't going to make it in show business, he figured, watching him wrap things up. Here came the smattering of applause, rising in volume as his signature intro music began. The house band finished, then gave up their seats to his own boys. He knocked back his drink and rose from the stool, kicking his legs to loosen them up before striding alongside the corner seats and up the steps, people rising to touch his arm and pat him on the shoulder as he brushed by them, smiling and wiping his hand along theirs, in a line. They loved that. He grabbed the microphone like it was a lifeline thrown to a drowning man. It was.

"Thank you, thank you very much! You're beautiful, how are ya'll doin?" Thank you very much! I wanna start out with a fresh song I just wrote, that's

on my new album, I hope you like it…" He had awoken in the cold pre-dawn hours last winter and scrawled down the words that had come to him in his sleep, and the music to them had been right there in his head, with them. It wasn't the first time that had happened, but sometimes he forgot the words before he could write them down. This one, he had remembered complete, and it seemed to be a crowd favorite.

"A long, long time ago, but I can st ill remember, how the music used to make me smile…" the clapping got louder. He grinned. They must have heard it, then. It would sell.

Paul ordered a beer and sat choking back tears, listening to the words and watching the fallen King work the crowd like he was born to do. From the biography he knew that the Beatles had been stranded in the States when the war interrupted their U.S. tour, and Elvis had let them stay at his Hollywood mansion until international flights back to England could resume. They'd already hung out with him there once, so they knew the layout of the place, and the Colonel took care of them while everybody else was packing up. These days big name acts like them never played east of the Rockies. These days, meaning post-nuclear 1970. How many kids had ended up fighting over Graceland? He couldn't recall. But here was the man, himself. Paul spent the set writing out his story on bar napkins he bribed the harried waitress into delivering backstage. She said she did, anyway, so he could only hope she had. "I really liked your movies.." he had begun. Somehow the misplaced memory of a sweatier version of the singer in a black leather jumpsuit kept intruding into his mind, but he couldn't remember where that was from.

Two weeks later, the Colonel handed the outline of a screenplay to a camera operator for Frank Coppola named George Lucas, who loved the spacey fiction storyline of it. The Colonel dug in: "With all of the enthusiasm over the recent moon landing, the Director would love it, too, wouldn't he? Best of all, look at the name of the co-writer. Of course he wants the leading role, too. Just imagine, Elvis Presley as Neil Armstrong! It'll be a smash! Just what the country needs! Aren't you a patriot?"

Paul had been coming back every night, memorizing the set by heart and waiting for a response. A note from himself had told him to stay in town, and move from the motel on Mulberry Street he'd been staying in to a boarding

house across the street. Each night after the show he prayed for guidance. He wasn't really sure that he was doing it right. After nearly a month, when he was about to give up and move on, it happened. Elvis sent for him after the show. The dressing room was smaller than he'd expected, and smelled worse. The rest of the band filed out, leaving them alone. They looked like they'd just been given some bad news.

"Oh, my boy, my boy, there he is, the idea man!" he was greeted with as the faux white leather chair swung around from the mirror. "Mr. Backpack! Say, what's in that thing, anyway, your movie camera? 'Cause we're going to Hollywood, science guy. I like your story. So do they. How'd you like to go make a movie?"

Timelines Q-S: The Colonel could have gotten government waivers for airplane tickets for them both, at a premium, since most jet travel was limited to official Federal business or corporate charters. Paul used his obvious eccentricity to portray an abject fear of flying to cover the fact that the vortex projector wouldn't make it through even the most cursory security check. They argued about it back and forth until a dinner invitation at Graceland provided the opportunity to subtley talk up the wonders of California in front of Priscilla. It took three jumps before she demanded to come along, and bring both the kids, too. Four trusted members of the Memphis Mafia were picked as bodyguards for the trip. Two limousines and a moving van headed west, Paul's backpack safe in the U-haul. It was the furthest he had been separated from it since Tel Aviv. He was anxious for a bit, but the feeling subsided.

America got greener west of the Mississippi, further away from the residual fallout belts. Federal authority was stronger in the heartland states closer to St. Louis, as well. Most noticeably, the roads were in better shape and traffic was thicker, even if most of the cars were still hard-used pre-war models. Green-clad military patrols in open trucks passed them more than once. Elvis rode in back with Paul and talked excitably about the movie business and how it worked, but as usually happened whenever he stopped moving, his audience soon began to doze off. The King eventually did, too, leaving Priscilla and her driver to deal with the children in the other stretch ahead. There were still plenty of roadside hikers with their thumbs out to gawk at the

gleaming chrome beasts as they hummed by, but the road lengthened out beneath them towards the sunset uncharitably.

The border guards at the autonomous Choctaw nation line didn't ask for autographs. They told them to turn south ten miles back into Texas, then stay clear of the border into New Mexico. Most of the driedout and wary truck plaza denizens where they made rest stops still treated them like celebrities, though, and word travelled faster than they did. Paul got photographed by a local newspaper reporter in Arizona and had to hide out in the men's room pretending to be sick to avoid the temporal pursuers who'd read the article in the future and decided to hang out in the parking lot. Otherwise, it was a relatively uneventful trip. The family took side detours at the Painted Desert and Grand Canyon, and Paul thought he'd never get Elvis to leave Las Vegas and get back on I-40. A bad losing streak, far beyond coincidence, helped persuade him in favor their departure, but Paul didn't question it at the time.

The big estate in the hills had small rooms just like Graceland, with low, claustrophobic ceilings belied by the foyer and spacious grounds. It reminded him of the berths back on the moon base. That made him think of the mission, again. He felt lost. Elvis Jr.'s three year old legs were chubby but driven by inspiration as he toddled towards the staircase. Paul intercepted him just in time, scooping the laughing child up and taking him back to the playroom where Lisa Marie was bawling for her big brother. The nanny had the evening off, and he had told the royal couple to go on to the cast party alone, while he watched the kids. It wasn't really the kind of place for screenwriters, anyway. Besides, he didn't feel well enough to go out very often, any more. They'd agreed to let him play babysitter, with two of the Memphis crew downstairs as backup, if he needed it. An hour later when the wormhole materialized in the hallway outside the playroom, he did, but it was already too early.

Timelines S-V: The vortex projector was in his room. He had to run away and leave the kids alone to get to it. The battery was almost depleted by the time he'd finished making the two familiar men in their dark suits suffer. On a philosophical level, Paul understood that he had to let them live, since he'd already met them before. Practically speaking, though, it was all that he could do to restrain himself. They must have understood the rules, too, since they

tried to talk to him instead of just killing him. Big mistake. But he knew that he couldn't stay and endanger the family any longer. He shouldered the backpack, woke the guards downstairs to watch the kiddos, and walked outside and down the hill towards the city lights of L.A..

Timelines V-AC: Their movie studio hired an investigator to find him, whose disappearance was ultimately laid at his feet, but Paul knew that the men from the future were to blame. He joined the homeless hanging out downtown and eventually made his way to Ventura, using the public power grid to keep his device charged, jumping skillfully to pick up tips left on café tables and take showers and naps in hotel rooms when the guests checked out early. At the beach there were no scars from the war at all. Young couples splashed in the waves. Hotdog vendors served real beef franks from their clean carts. Musicians played for donations, passing around bottles of cheap wine and joints. Paul thought that some of them sounded familiar, but that happened a lot to him, here and now.

His backpack made him stand out from the tourist crowd, but there were others traveling up and down the coast with all of their belongings strapped on their back or slung over a shoulder. Some of the
performers themselves looked close to homeless. He sat with one group in a circle to rest and tell his story again, as he still did many times every day to whomever would listen. They recited poetry and sang bits of songs as they wrote them out loud together. Their apparent leader had long brown hair and a full beard, swaying back and forth to his own words as he spoke them:

"All hail the Soviet dawn. Red and oozing like some new bandage. Infinite in reach and jest, until its' other moon reveals her shortened quest…"

"Heavy, Jim, heavy," his sidekick, wearing round glasses, complimented him, tapping on a piece of driftwood like a piano, his eyes squeezed shut in rapture. The other two nodded, in either agreement or consent. Paul had been around enough druggies to know the difference. When it came to be his turn he told his tale while they listened respectfully, taking it in like an imaginative acid trip. It hadn't even made a dent. He struggled to his feet and dusted the sand from his trousers, thinking that the time to hesitate was through. He had spent too long wallowing in the mire, from one ocean to the other, across America. He had to try now, even if he could only lose. Just

telling the truth wasn't enough to change anything. He was going to have to do something about the past himself. Marissa had visited him in a dream, and given him some ideas on where to start.

Timeline B: The whole reason for putting elves in a forest was so that housewives and lovesick college coeds alike could feel the love for trees and plants and flirt with Wiccan Gaia Earth worship stuff, right? Always had been, always would be. They could imagine their own secret woodsy rendezvous with soulful guys with pointy ears, and if the elf men were too limpwristed for their romantic tastes, he could throw in some bad boy werewolves. That was Paul's very simple formula, and it had worked just fine for eleven books, so far. Why Mindy wanted the wizard to turn into a good guy and romance the elf queen was beyond him. In what universe would any woman fantasize about being with a smart guy like that, and identify with their love interest? It just didn't happen. He was a smart guy, and he should know. Not even ones like Paula that you could make lame jokes about your names being practically the same to were really into it, all that much, no matter how desperately lonely they might be. How would he even write such stuff?

"Scorchingly their gazes passed beneath the fronds, wizard and queen warming the cool recesses of the shadowed dale where sun's rays had never reached before. Long had they awaited such heat and light arriving to penetrate their darkness, each craving the other's fire yet fearing being burned again. Her wolf companion looked up, tongue lolling, and was content that the queen had found another pet. His tail wagged at the wizard, thumping the forest floor in happiness. The curse had been lifted, and magic freed their hearts. All of the woodland sang in joy as the two touched for the first time, their cloaks dropping soundlessly to the leaves…"

He was going to have to go to the Trident office and meet with Mindy, face to face. All of these phone calls every day were interfering with his creative process too much, and she obviously felt like she was the one writing the book, now. There was no need for her to ring Paul up and ask him three times a week to read aloud to her what he had been writing, when he could just as easily e-mail it to her. After all, she had already suggested a couple of times

that they should have a ‘collaborative meeting’ over dinner to discuss the book’s direction, so she shouldn’t have any reason to be upset when he came by the office, right? Not that women needed any particular reason to get upset, based on his admittedly limited experience.

His extended, well, his lifelong
bachelorhood hadn’t honed very sharp grooming habits. Why shower more than once or twice a week when you didn’t need to go out into the world? Everything he needed, he could order online. Well, not everything, but some things you learned to live without. Even so, Paul found himself a bit nervous as he shaved and tried different colognes from the box full that his mom had given him for every Christmas and birthday. He would take the bus, of course, that would put him there just before lunch. His printer ground out the latest progress so he could take it with him like a shield. He’d have something to show for his time and efforts if things got ugly when he revealed to Mindy that he was Francesca. That Francesca was him. Maybe then he would start getting the respect he deserved from the agent his publisher had kind of slowly eased over on him.

Part of the problem was the fantasy genre itself. And, the audience. Largely, though, it was his books. Paul felt like he had been telling the same story over and over again, and nobody was really listening. Nothing he wrote made any difference to reality, it didn’t touch the real world, there was no flesh and blood and life in it. He had to get out of the house, off the computer, away from the phone, and out into the real world, with this. Confronting Mindy face to face was the first step in that change. Ever since he’d decided three days ago that this was what he needed to do, his dreams had been full of different ways the meeting might go. Some of them were embarrassing fantastical, in their own right. Others seemed like good ideas. He’d probably just wing it, though. His impulses had been serving him well, lately, at least where it came to the book, it felt like to him, anyway.
Chapter Four

The book of Job, Chapter 38, verse 1, King James Version:
“Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said…”
Exodus 19:16-20 King James Version (KJV):

16 And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a

thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled.

17 And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount.
19And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice.

18 And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly.

20 And the LORD came down upon mount Sinai, on the top of the mount: and the LORD called Moses up to the top of the mount; and Moses went up.

"It is impossible to create a formula for the future which does not take into account that our society has been doing something special against the Negro for hundreds of years. How then can he be absorbed into the mainstream of American life if we do not do something special for him now, in order to balance the equation and equip him to compete on a just and equal basis? What will it profit him to be able to send his children to an integrated school if the family income is insufficient to buy them school clothes? What will he gain by being permitted to move into an integrated neighborhood if he cannot afford to do so because he is unemployed or has a lowpaying job with no future?

In asking for something special, the Negro is not seeking charity. He does not want to languish on welfare rolls any more than the next man. He does not want to be given a job he cannot handle. Neither, however, does he want to be told that there is no place where he can be trained to handle it. Few people consider the fact that, in addition to being enslaved for two centuries, the Negro was, during all those years, robbed of the wages of his toil. No amount of gold could provide an adequate compensation for the exploitation and humiliation of the Negro in America down through the centuries. Not all the wealth of this affluent society could meet the bill. Yet a price can be placed on unpaid wages."

(M.L. King, Why We Can't Wait)

Timeline AE: Part of the global grid collapse's causational factors hinged on the gradual economic collapse of the United States. Losing a nuclear war was

never great for the G.N.P.. The trade embargoes from most of the Soviet-aligned world had hurt them badly, too, but much of the damage they'd done to themselves, bankrupting the nation with massive taxation to pay for growing entitlement programs. The most expensive and expansive of these was the reparations program, entitling every person who claimed African ancestry to a lifelong stipend, a reparations pension, in
compensation for the slavery of their ancestors. Each generation, each year, the reparations claiming percentage of the U.S. population swelled, until the balance was no longer tenable. Far too many more received, than gave, and none were blessed, any more.

Paul and Marissa had discussed this as a part of the time shift targets, in a worst case scenario consideration. The case was looking pretty bad, from his perspective. President King had proposed the bill, initially, and the Congressional Black Caucus had pushed it through, but a last ditch effort to challenge the constitutionality of reparations, led by conservative
Republicans, had gone all the way to the Supreme Court before being stopped cold by a single vote majority decision, the
prevailing opinion having been written by Chief Justice Kennedy. It didn't matter that no living blacks had ever been slaves or that no living whites had ever owned slaves. It didn't matter that many blacks and whites had immigrated to America after the end of slavery, or whether those white's ancestors had fought and died to end it. Whites had to pay reparations taxes, blacks received them. Only by officially filing as a nonwhite citizen could taxpayers avoid the ten percent penalty fine due to the I.R.S. annually. As a result, the white percentage of the U.S. population on paper plummeted overnight, and the black percentage skyrocketed, leading to system-choking litigation over who could claim the newly favored status.

The majority opinion had quoted more than just the Constitution, dredging up older, more tenuous support:

And if thy brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, be sold unto thee, and serve thee six years; then in the seventh year thou shalt let him go free from thee. And when thou sendest him out free from thee, thou shalt not let him go away empty: thou shalt furnish him liberally out of thy flock, and out of thy floor, and out of thy winepress: of that wherewith the LORD thy God

hath blessed thee thou shalt give unto him. And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the LORD thy God redeemed thee: therefore I command thee this thing today.

— Deuteronomy 15: 12–15

Besides the crime which consists in violating the law, and varying from the right rule of reason, whereby a man so far becomes degenerate, and declares himself to quit the principles of human nature, and to be a noxious creature, there is commonly injury done to some person or other, and some other man receives damage by his
transgression: in which case he who hath received any damage, has, besides the right of punishment common to him with other men, a particular right to seek reparation.

— John Locke, "Second Treatise"

The Israeli prosecution of German corporations, and the German government, over financial claims from Holocaust survivors, was also used as prima facie evidence of precedent by Kennedy and the other four liberal justices, relying on international law rather than U.S. cases.

Yes, the Supreme Court Chief Justice was the key. Otherwise, the decision would have gone the other way, allowing the nation a cooling off period after King's two terms. He'd have to jump back a couple of years, at least, to find a time when he could catch Bobby away from the White House
compound in St. Louis. It took a couple of tentative exploratory trips to find out that he'd spent the month of June in 1968 campaigning for his brother in California, during Jack's failed bid to drum up support for a third term. Maybe Paul could convince him of how slavery reparations would destroy the country, if he got a chance to talk to him out from under the President's shadow.

Timeline AF-AT: It didn't go as well as he'd hoped. That was an understatement. It was an epic disaster of cosmic proportions. Fatally so, for a few Bobby Kennedys.

Young, arrogant, self-righteous. Robert F. Kennedy looked cocky even from

across a room, smug in his expensive sport coat and tie. No wonder Hoover hated him so much. He wasn't even half the man his brother was, and all four of them put together weren't worthy to tie their father's shoes.

No matter how many times he tried to do it over, things kept getting worse. First, Kennedy'd refused to speak with him, too engrossed with his meal to pay attention. Rudely waving him away, even. Paul probably didn't look like he belonged in such a nice place. Then, he'd listened for a minute before excusing himself to go to the bathroom, and never coming back. Finally, when Paul had tried to follow the Attorney General to finish his story, he'd ended up practically chasing him through the hotel restaurant's kitchen. Despite several doovers there was always a rush of vortexes, a crippling wave of panicked, impotent foreknowledge, and a gunshot. Sometimes two. Once he saw himself, another himself, stepping between the Attorney General and the shooter, and taking the bullet. That was surreal. It didn't save Kennedy, though. The assassin just fired again. Where the other man had come from and why he'd suddenly shot Bobby in the head right in front of him Paul couldn't fathom, but clearly the walk from Venice back to the city had been a wasted effort. Obviously the men from the future had killed the younger Kennedy, traveling back from wherever to keep him from listening to what Paul had to say. There were so many layers to the
conspiracy, like an onion. A four
dimensional onion. It was enough to make him cry. He'd have to try something else, he thought, as he avoided the police cars racing to the scene past the alley he'd ducked into. Hadn't that been a one way street, when he walked up it on the way here? Or had he just forgotten that detail, in all the excitement?

Hiding out afterwards, Paul scanned a week old newspaper for signs that he'd changed anything. If Bobby Kennedy never lived to become a Supreme Court Justice, then he wouldn't have been able to write the majority decision. Had somebody else taken his place, and time resolved itself, correcting the change and smoothing over his
ripples…his tsunami? He had jumped so many times that it was hard to remember how things had really been in his 1970, before he had begun shifting things. Even inadvertently. Certainly there should have been at least a few stories in the national section about the National Recovery Act, or

some uplifting propaganda about resettled war refugees being successful. Wait…there it was, a sidebar. Of course the war had happened here, too, it had come before this time. He was getting confused. Had reparations ever been passed, or not? Paul needed to find a library, and find out.

The next day the flag was limply at half staff in honor of the fallen Attorney General, and according to the June 6th headlines in the library's newspaper racks, a nationwide manhunt had been declared. Wait, that wasn't right. Shouldn't they have somebody already in custody? A foreigner? The reference section was just past the
periodicals. There was no mention of reparations, there, though, because they wouldn't become law for another twenty years. He was losing it. Sleep. That's what he needed. There was a constant pain in his stomach from the cramping, and all of his bones ached. One RFK quote from the eulogizing editorial article struck him as odd. Really ironic.

" Few will have the greatness to bend history itself; but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total; of all those acts will be written the history of this generation."

Inside of the library, people had stared at the sickly man with the big rectangular backpack. Outside, he looked a bit less strange. It was California, after all. Just not his California. Not any more. He'd made sure of that. Paul felt disgusted and
nauseous. The thick hardcover book he had slipped under his coat from the reference section hadn't set off any alarms. How could he undo things? If God wouldn't answer him, maybe this book would have an answer in it somewhere. Could it tell him how to unbreak time? Not by going back and intervening, he'd already seen how that turned out, and it would end the mission and himself, for good. But how could it, since he'd already been there? He was afraid to find out. Even out of time, even dying, the instinct for self-preservation was a strong one. Paul told himself it was really a dedication to his mission and saving humanity that made up his mind not to do that, even though it looked like he either already had or at some point would, but he felt the lie of it even as he thought it. What he had seen himself do, dying for Kennedy, was something which he had already undone, in the future, by deciding not to…or just a few seconds ago, by deciding not to,

either way. He had fixed that. How could he fix the rest?

That night he found an empty bed in the Catholic mission, where no questions were asked. There was also a disused chapel in the mission. He sat exhausted, trying to pray, but kept nodding out. A bright light against his closed eyelids woke him. Even before he opened them, he knew it was a wormhole destination opening right on top of him.

The three men who emerged were strangers he'd never seen before, dressed as laboratory technicians and looking as confused as he felt. Only one of them had the presence of mind to speak.

"Paul Riley, you know that your mission will ultimately fail, because you are still here, and even in the future you could never change the past without creating a different timeline. Yours, the universe you left, still sits there, as it did when and where you left it."

"So, since you came back, you can't change this one, either, only create a different one from the one you left. Neither of us can make a difference. Only create a difference. It's pointless. Why bother?"

This surprised them enough that they exchanged looks before the spokesman continued. "We were and are willing to sacrifice our lives for the greater good of our people across the multiverse."

"The multiverse. That's an interesting concept. So, likewise, logically, the greater good of all of my families and all of me could serve as equal motivation to keep fighting you, creating different realities in which you're foiled."

The three lab techs consulted with one another, looking angrily back and forth from him to their spokesman. Just as he turned towards Paul to speak again, a chatter of gunfire came from the wider origin of the open portal, bullets thudding into the backs of the men facing him. One round whined past Paul, ricocheting against a wall. Two of them fell forward onto their faces nearly soundlessly, while the one closest took longer to die. The guilty look on his face perplexed Paul. He must have done something that hadn't happened yet. Probably in the past.

He had gathered up his backpack and stolen library book and was out on the street before anyone arrived to investigate the noise and find the unidentifiable bodies. First, thought, he searched them, finding ID cards with Hebraic script. He recognized the type of ID from the prison he'd been held in, and put two and two together. He'd been the one who'd fired the shots that killed them, so long ago. Well, at least now he knew how that worked out.

Two hours of walking brought him to a homeless camp under an overpass where an empty box provided shelter from the rising sun. Soon he let exhaustion wash over him. The only way out was by going forward. The only way forward was by going backwards. Paul started awake, feeling his brain alert and fully oxygenated by the sensation more than the sound of a voice, a male voice of comfort, like a gently firm hand on his shoulder from behind.

"It will be okay. Just do what you promised, do what you're supposed to do, and it will be okay."

He rose, and straightened. The pack seemed less heavy, after all. He needed to find a wall outlet to charge it. If in the morning he still existed, at least to be here and know why, he would know that he had failed once again. Otherwise, well, he would have peace. God had promised him.

From what he'd abs orbed in the school celebration of the anniversary, the first black President, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been inaugurated in 1980. It had taken him several months to formulate the outline of the Federal Reparations Act. That gave Paul the spring as a window of opportunity to assassinate the Commander in Chief. Having tried before, he knew that talking his way into the White House would be impossible, so he couldn't debate his way to rest. But wait, he could do the job before it became that hard, even if the wider window left more room for time to readjust. He even knew the exact place, too. He'd already been there, if just not then. The Lorraine Motel. The President had given a speech there, once, back when he was just a protest organizer, during a city union strike. It actually hadn't been that long ago. A couple of months, maybe. He'd seen the memorial plaque outside the lobby. Back to Memphis, then. This time, he'd have to take a bus.

Timelines AU-AW: This time he was weaker, unable to hold any food down, and feeling dehydrated, so he didn't get to enjoy much of the scenery on his way across America. The cancer must have
metastasized. He couldn't take the chance. The backpack stayed with him at all times, silently pumping more radiation into his body. Maybe it would kill the evil cells, he thought. Didn't they use radiation to treat it, too? The idea was comforting. Paul rolled back into town on June 13th, 1968, and jumped back to April 1st. It took him a couple of days to make sure that his South Main Street boarding house key still worked and slip into the second floor bathroom unseen. The rifle was still already there under the tub's claw feet, waiting for him, just like he'd somehow known it would be. He even remembered prying up the loose floorboards to hide it there in the future past, when he lived here, after this was all over. Yes, it was loaded. Remington 30.06. Big bullets.

The night before he could hear the shrieks and laughter of partying across the street, and see women coming and going from the two adjoining rooms. Hookers, it looked like, he noticed with amusement. "I'm not a negro tonight", he heard cheered, more than once. Around dawn the noise faded, and he caught a catnap, too. Black men in suits came and went the next afternoon, until near dusk, when the sound of partying started again. Paul was glad he'd thought to put the 'Out of Order' sign on the bathroom and lock the door. Somebody had burst in on him once, it seemed like. Around six p.m. the festivities moved onto the second story balcony of room 306, directly across from his window. The future President was talking to some people below him in the parking lot. It was as good a time as any.

King would never be Senator, now, or President. The nation would never even have a black Chief Executive, he imagined, if it wasn't him. Back from the window, out the door, down the stairs, sirens beginning in the distance. No, too soon, they must be for some random crime, nothing special like his. Soon enough, though, the ripples were felt.

The city was on fire. Word had spread quicker than he had imagined, and riots were breaking out. He heard the breaking of glass and the shouts of anger. Blacks rampaged into white neighborhoods, looting and raping and killing. Maybe ditching the rifle had been a bad idea. He might need it to get

out of town. Why had he not disappeared, and his mission never happened, the instant he pulled the trigger? It made no sense. This wasn't like what had happened with Bobby Kennedy. Paul had actually killed a man. He had taken a deep breath, let it half out, and pulled the trigger, seeing the blood puff out behind King, watching him fall. He was sure that nobody could survive being shot in the face like that. It was such a big bullet. He must be dead. Why hadn't things changed? He wondered what Elvis was doing just a few blocks away right now, or was he still in Hollywood?

Jumping back a week, to before the assassination, made it possible to get out of Memphis and avoid the fates of the forty or fifty white people killed by black mobs after King died. He thought about leaving the country. Maybe going to Britain, or Rhodesia. Anywhere he had never been before, and wouldn't run into himself. Somewhere he had left no trail in the past for the men from the future to follow. A chance to rest, and die in peace, without worrying about what would happen to the rest of the world for a change. He had done all that he could, hadn't he? Let things play out, and see. He was just so tired.

Maybe he would go and see Terri before he left. Where had she gone to school? Marissa, too. No, wait, you can't have it both ways, right? Can you? Did you? The police were searching for a man. Surely they would find one. He would have to make sure that he set up another patsy. That would mean that he had to get better, and live long enough to be able to come back and do that, otherwise he already would have gotten caught. So, he'd take off the pack for a few days and rest. Just long enough to get his strength back. Then he'd see if he could leave it off for long enough to let Bobby die, and set up his assassin, too, unless the men from the future had already taken care of that, for their own reasons. Why he should he go to any trouble to cover up for them, any way? Just because they were in the same racket of changing the past didn't mean that they were on the same side, after all. Let the future Jews get their hands dirty for a change. They'd probably choose a
Palestinian fall guy or something, as a joke.

His second day of vacation Paul awoke from a dream telling himself to look in the hollow cardboard roll inside the toilet paper, where a plastic baggie holding six pills was hidden. They looked like they'd been there for a while,

but he bet that any fingerprints on them were his own, and he'd never been in this motel before. Not yet. He knew to take two at first, then the other four one per day, to put the cancer into remission. Leukemia, would be the diagnosis. For a while, at least. Nothing lasts forever. Except those paradox loops. They were a doozy. Maybe he should remember to leave a love note to himself, he could use the
encouragement. Where was it at? A wad of bills was all he found, when he looked again. Maybe that all the love he needed.

A few weeks later, real time, he watched the t.v. news coverage of Kennedy's assassination, but it was a little off. Why was that Texas Senator talking about it like he was in charge of anything? Oh. Oh, shit. The room spun, and graying John Fitzgerald Kennedy was back where he ought to be, teary-eyed and angry, addressing the nation. Paul had been talking to himself again. He had to get to Dallas.

The war was too big of an event, too nuanced and complicated, for one person to stop by themselves, even with multiple attempts. Several incidents during and before 1965 had piled on top of one another, in quick succession. The U.S. bombing North Vietnam in Operation Rolling Thunder, and the angry reaction to it in the U.N. Security Council by Khrushchev, who had recently purged Brezhnev and Kosygin from the Kremlin, for example. The Soviet leader had gotten bolder since Kennedy had blinked during the Cuban missile crisis three years earlier. The U.S. troop withdrawal from Saigon that followed, and the collapse of General Khanh's government. The President had screwed things up while he was transitioning from Marlene Dietrich to Marilyn Monroe, or vice-versa, it was hard to keep them straight. But how could he get those Russian ships to turn around, instead of the U.S. lifting the blockade? At what point during the two week crisis had Jack been the most vulnerable? Could he, should he, convince him before? What about the removal of the U.S. missiles from Turkey that had emboldened the Soviets just as much? Counting them all up, all of the other factors together couldn't match the
attempted assassination of the President the year after, and the abject paranoia that had plagued Kennedy from that afternoon in Dallas until the first missiles were launched two years later. That had to be the key, the turning point, the fulcrum he could change. He finally got around to reading the

chapter in the Quantum Mechanics textbook he'd taken from the library, about time. It was pretty thick stuff.

" Einstein theorized that time and space do not move in straight lines. Due to gravity, they are on a massive curve. Because it is on a curve, it wraps around itself like a sphere, and if you go in what you perceive to be a 'straight line' you will in fact end up where you started. You recognize this as Deja Vu. In this dimension, you are in fact going in circles, and you feel this as Deja Vu.

Einstein explained that time and space are warped by the gravity of enormous objects like the Sun.

Although he could prove this on paper, it demanded physical evidence before people could believe it.

Einstein was not able to prove his theory until the first time a solar eclipse was finally successfully photographed in the 20th century, in 1919.

With this first photograph of a solar eclipse, researchers were able to compare standard maps of stars in the sky with their position during an eclipse, and were able to prove that the stars which in that moment were behind the Sun, were in slightly different positions during the eclipse than they were in an empty night sky.

The Moon, which passes over the Sun during a solar eclipse and the Sun itself, are both enormous objects whose gravitational pull bend light, causing stars which were mapped during a normal night sky to appear in slightly warped and different locations during the eclipse.

(The Moon is necessary to cover the Sun and allow us to observe the stars in the immediate vicinity of the sun. It was otherwise impossible to prove this theory).

In other words, the gravity of the sun warps light itself and causes stars to appear in different positions than they actually are. Einstein explained that this was not just a warping of light, but of space itself (which is connected to time).

"Where were they going with this?" Paul thought, his eyes wanting to jump ahead. "It doesn't have anything to do with the kind of time travel I've seen and done."

" Through this validation of Einstein's theory that gravity warps light (in space), he was able to prove that gravity warps time as well, because time and space are from the same fabric in our dimension.

So, time is not linear. It is on a curve. A massive curve, like the curvature of the Earth. And like the curvature of the Earth, while standing on our planet's surface, you will not see this curvature until you move far enough up in the atmosphere. To human beings, the horizon and everything on the ground appear to be flat - and so the idea of a 'flat earth' was a commonly held belief for us, being residents of this planet. In the same vein, the idea of linear time is a commonly held belief for us, being residents of this dimension. But due to gravity, time is subject to the same phenomena of curvature that the planet is, and this can be observed.

What happens when you place a pen on a ball and move it forward along the surface in a straight line? You will eventually curve back to the original point of contact, and the line will connect with itself. This is as simple to understand as travelling around the world. You will end up right back where you started if you go in a straight line.

As a resident of this dimension, existing not only on a spherical planet, but also inside spherical spacetime, you are recognizing this phenomena when you experience 'deja vu'. You really have been here before, and because time and space are on a massive curve, you may not realize it until you have gone far enough along the curve to end up back where you started.

This is Deja Vu. It is not just a lapse in your brain's chemistry, it is not a mis-firing of neurons. It is your non-physical and noncorporeal consciousness (soul) recognizing itself to be in the same place in time and space that it was in the 'past'. Only your soul can experience Deja Vu, as it is a spiritual emotion situated outside of your physical body, and beyond the 3rd and 4th dimension."

That all sounded more like some kind of spiritual stuff than science to Paul, who knew Déjà vu to be what happened when someone had or was about to go change the past. Maybe he should write a book about what it really was, some day, and see if it could get published. The idea made him chuckle to himself. But if he did, he could then drop off a copy to a younger Paul. It sure would have been nice to have been mentally or psychologically prepared for all of this, if it was possible to have not jinxed it. "Jinx" seemed to mean creating a time paradox, too…

Texas Governor John Connally, if he had lived, might have become a great man. The kind of man who truly changed things, a real leader, instead of a martyr like Gen. Walker. And how might the President's state of mind have been different in 1965 if Jackie hadn't been critically wounded by the sniper's third bullet? Then, it hit him. What if the
President hadn't survived that November day, after all?

Paul rented a car. The driver's license had been in his wallet, just when he needed it. He felt good enough to drive, better than he had in a long time. This was going to be the solution, he could smell it, sense it, taste it. It just felt right. There had been a cup of tea outside his door this morning. 'Tea' for Texas. It must be a sign. His future self was so funny. When would he develop such a sense of humor?

Timeline B: Mindy looked like the kind of girl his mom would have approved of. That is to say, she was dressed modestly, and had on no visible

makeup. She was fresh faced and healthy looking, though, if a little shy. That was obvious from the way the red crept across her cheeks and down her neck into her collar when he walked straight up to her desk at Trident Publications and introduced himself. It had taken two drinks at the bar down the block for the courage to do that, something of which his mother certainly would not have approved, but what she didn't know wouldn't hurt her. He was all prepared to launch into a tirade about how Gossamer Woods was HIS baby and she didn't get to spank it, until she burst out crying. One sentence in about who did she think she was, and the spigot burst. Why was she crying? He hadn't meant to upset her, not really. Now all of the other girls at their desks were staring, whispering. He felt like a heel.

Sitting down fast in the plastic chair in front of her little desk and shushing her hadn't worked very quickly, but after a few sobs and nose-blowings on the box of Kleenex's top he'd helpfully offered her from her own desk, she settled down. That box of Kleenex was a bad sign. Warning bells told him that girls who habitually keep a box of Kleenex on their desks probably cry a lot. He took the opportunity to look her over in more detail while she composed herself. Shortish brown hair, kind of auburn, they called it, he guessed, covering small ears with no apparent points at their tops. So, she wasn't elven, then. Eyes, though momentarily red, that looked green in the center, hazel on the edges. A long chin. Freckles. He judged her age at around twenty. Very, very young. Practically a teenager. What did girls her age talk about, besides werewolves being cuddly? He started over again, by apologizing, holding up one finger, then getting up and walking back to the end of the hall where the elevator door opened and closed as people came and went. She watched in alarm, thinking he was leaving, but instead he walked back to her desk, smiled cheerfully, held out his hand, and said "Hi, you must be Mindy. I'm Paul. Nice to meet you." That made her giggle, and smile back. Score.

"How did you know where my desk was right off?" she asked over lunch. He'd noticed how slim she was when she stood up after accepting his clumsy offer to buy her a burger to make up for the way he'd
blustered in. Probably she wouldn't eat much. Mindy surprised him by ordering the large fries.

“ I just searched for the prettiest, smartest looking girl in the room,” he thought to himself. She looked embarrassed. Did he just say that out loud? No, what he’d actually said was “I not only can write, I can read pretty good, too, and your desk nameplate is in my native language.” Damn it, there he went again. He smiled to take the sting out of it, and she looked up and returned it. A pretty smile, too, one side wider than the other. On the way down the elevator ride had been made easier by her confiding that she’d known all along that he was Francesca, and what a fan she was of the series, even though she couldn’t say so in their professional capacity. “Professional capacity”, he’d thought. So, is this outside of our professional capacity? Like, a date? He hadn’t really been prepared for that.

As it turned out, she had some pretty good ideas about werewolf packs and sorcery. He wished he could take some notes. He’d have to call her again tomorrow to get her to repeat what she was saying, when he had a pen and some paper
available. Or maybe he could get her to come over for a brain-storming session. That would require a lot of house cleaning first, but the collaboration might be worth it. For the sake of the book, of course.

“What makes you so sure that girls wouldn’t buy a book written by a man?” she was asking, stretched out on his mother’s couch with one long leg pulled up under her. He was distracted by the curve of her hip under the thin skirt she was wearing, and took a second to respond. They’d been hanging out for nearly eight weeks now, some times at his place and sometimes at her little apartment, though when she invited him over he knew that was a signal that it was more for personal than literary reasons.

“Well, they might…if…” he scooted next to her, putting his hand on her knee. That caused her to raise up, face to face with him, breathing in what he breathed out.

“Yeah? If what?” she challenged, her face serious.

“If there was a woman liste d as a coauthor,” he finished, grinning at the way her eyes widened. There definitely was a lot of green in them. Mindy leaned forward and kissed him, throwing her arms around his neck and pulling him down on top of her. This was much better than pecking away at the keyboard

all by himself. Well worth splitting the byline, even, some slow to react part of his mind concluded, before
detachment became impossible. From her lofty portrait, mom smiled down on them.

Some time later, Paul reflected on how sometimes it took less magic than fortune to favor the bold and win the fair maiden. That was only after she'd helped him work through a conflict resolution in chapter eight, though.

Mindy leafed through his old school yearbook that she'd found somewhere on mom's shelves. She was enjoying this.

"You were a cute kid." She remarked, pointing at a third grade picture.

"Yeah, I have no idea what happened", he quipped, making her kick him in the ribs as they lay sprawled together on the floor.

"Stop it!" she groaned. "So, what did little Paul want to be when he grew up? A famous writer?" she asked, half playfully.

"No, a tampon. No strings attached," he answered, fascinated by the lines of her naked ribcage under his hand.

"Ewwwww. Gross! You perv! No, seriously, tell me," she insisted, kicking him again. What did you want to be?"

"Okay…I…wanted to be…an astronaut. Or a soldier." He looked at her, to see if she would make fun of him. She looked right back at him.

"I could totally get that, for you," she replied, going back to the stack of yearbooks while he studied her profile in the dim light from his mother's dusty chandelier. He knew that he was in love. It was just like in the romance novels. It was time for a bodice ripper.

Before long she'd begun helping him clean up the place when she came over. Apparently it wasn't up to female standards, even though he'd considered it spotless. Some of mom's stuff got packed away, and boxed up for storage, but that was okay, too. Paul had a new woman in his life, now. Actually, it

was really her life. He was just living in it. Mindy left out the old family Bible, saying that it was important.

Chapter Five

Hebrews 11:5 King James Version:

“By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: "He could not be found, because God had taken him away." For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. “

Timeline AW: All the way to Dallas, Paul thought about how to reverse his curse and move forward in time. He wasn’t a physicist, so he couldn’t conceptualize the mathematics behind the question, but neither was he constrained by them, as Dr. Harris or Dr. Jones would have been. The Gideon’s had left a book in his motel room more useful to him than the library textbook. Towards the end of it, in Revelations chapter 4, there seemed to be some future time traveling going on, for sure. And he did remember in one of their late night
brainstorming sessions Harris saying that particles called muons, similar to electrons, could be sent forward in time incrementally by manipulating the gravity around them. It just hadn’t been what they needed, at the time. But what if it was his only way to get back home? Or to finally stop the Mossad agents from the future?

Obviously, unless time ended, since travel through it in at least one direction was possible, eventually everybody would be able to do it, or there would have to be totalitarianism to restrict it, and that would be hard to maintain forever, literally, eternally. So without a temporal quarantine, somebody had already been there, done that. Maybe they were right, and you couldn’t change the past, only create different futures. How would he ever find the right one, then? Were they like memories, the very act of recalling them creating new synaptic connections that changed them from the original experience, in slight variations? Like genetic mutations in DNA compounding into something no longer recognizable?

Timelines AX-TS: When he got to the book depository, Paul knew just where to go for the best angle. Of course he would. A longer jump back than he was used to since his first left him lost and disoriented in 1963. It had been a day

of impulses and doovers that confused even him about who had pulled the trigger for the killing shot from the grassy knoll. All he knew for sure was that the man who might have otherwise used nuclear bombs on Hanoi, ushering in a devastating response from Russia on New York and Washington, would never cripple the country through atomic warfare. But Hanoi hadn't been bombed, had it? Not now, not before. He found a quiet place to try to repiece together the three way
gunfight from the fractured memories in his head. The church doors were open, and it was dark and silent inside. The normal city sirens of police, ramping up their presence in preparation for the President's visit, were distant wails of premature grief, out there. It was warm for November, but this was Texas, after all. The pew was cool and firm to his touch, something to hang on to, solid.

On one side, himself, armed with the Italian 5.6 mm rifle he or somebody else had left for him on the sixth floor of the building with the gaudy Hertz car rental sign leering above it. On another, the two Mossad agents from the future, or two men like them, since he couldn't see them clearly on the hill behind the stockade fence. They had been given a signal from Dealey plaza, by a man opening an umbrella on the sunny day. Then, all hell had broken loose. There was a live oak tree branch partially blocking his field of view of that angle to his right. He'd already lined up for his own shot, and just begun to take a deep breath to pull the trigger when he saw the President jerk back and to the left. On the third, all of the President's men, who couldn't put Humpty- Dumpty back together again. One had climbed up onto the back of the convertible, spoiling his follow-up shot. None of them had exchanged fire with one another, but they all were waging their own wars. Paul thought he had fired twice. Maybe three times, though, in the excitement. It had seemed like he was on autopilot. He'd have to go back and watch to be sure.

There were other things t hat didn't fit, other people who'd seemed out of place. Time tourists, maybe? The woman filming the event on the south side of Elm. He'd seen her from his corner window clearly. He couldn't see what the Jews on the grassy knoll had done afterwards because of a freeway sign that was in the way, but he'd heard shouting, once his ears stopped ringing, and put the rifle under some boxes before going down the rear stairwell and jumping back a day. He hadn't had a chance to stop the cop who'd pull over

Oswald from getting killed. Collateral damage, just like the Commie lover himself, Paul figured. Millions of lives being saved in a couple of years were worth it.

The priest startled him by placing a hand on his shoulder. “Are you okay, my son?”, he asked in a deeper voice than might have been expected, considering his relatively short stature.

“Oh, yes, thank you Father, I’m sorry, I thought that I was alone.” Paul replied, sheepishly.

“Well, you were, except for me, and God. We’re always here. So in that sense, you’re never alone.” The old man smiled, his eyes twinkling faintly in the shadows. “But you were talking to yourself, so I thought you might need some company.”

“Was I? Well, maybe so. I’m just kind of tired, I’m sorry, I just needed to rest for a minute.” Paul began to get up, but the priest held his shoulder firmly, urging him to stay seated, and plopped down beside him, instead.

“Why do you keep apologizing, my son? Have you done something you’d like to confess?” He waved towards the
confessionals to the left of the aisle leading towards the altar.

“Not yet, Father. Not yet.” Paul shook his head, ruefully. The priest nodded in
understanding.

He looked at the backpack, and the pale face. “You look like you’re not feeling well. I haven’t seen you in here before, I don’t think. You’re not from the Parish?”

“No, I’m just traveling. In town to see the

President.” Paul revealed. Lots of other people were, too. It wasn’t likely he’d be remembered.

“Ah, I see. That explains the pack. A little down on your luck at the

moment?" the priest guessed.

"You could say that, Father. But I have Faith. Some day I know I know I'm going to be alright. I have been…" his voice trailed off.

The older man looked uncomfortable for a moment, almost afraid, but quickly recovered. "We have a decent soup kitchen next door, if you're hungry," he offered, a normal fallback for him when derelicts came in and made him nervous, probably. But his eyes said something different.

"Thanks, I might check it out. But mainly I think I can use a prayer, if you have one to spare."

Back on comfortable ground, the priest nodded confidently. "I always do, for those traveling uncertain paths." He paused a moment. "But I have a special feeling about you, my son. I don't know what it is. I'll light a candle that you may find your way home, wherever it may be. We're all on the same path, or different paths to the same home, lad." He stood up and shuffled towards the front of the church, not looking back. "Back to the source," he heard the priest mumble. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust…"

The soup was good, hot, and filling, and one of the nuns who served it gave him a medallion when he'd finished. St.
Christopher, the patron of all travelers, she'd said as she smiled, gently laying her hand on the pack he hadn't taken off since he entered the cafeteria room. Paul half expected her to jerk her hand back at the feeling of radiation coursing through her fingers, but instead he felt like his burden had been lightened, somehow.

The next morning he woke up in another YMCA, listening to the other homeless men complain bitterly about the spoiled rich kid President coming to town while they went jobless. He didn't feel like anything had changed, at least not yet. Later that evening when the talk had changed to angry
resentment over the assassination, he still hadn't disappeared into thin air, as he kept expecting to once his mission was done. Maybe he never would. Maybe he was stuck in the past even if he did change the future. His future. His past. Paul tried not to think about it too deeply again. It was hard to think of anything else, though.

Clearly, killing people didn't work. Murder was not the solution. Maybe the priest was a sign of that. Here and now he hadn't yet shed any more blood. He could avoid doing so at all by staying back from it. From holding himself back from this day, rather than holding back this day. Maybe instead of doing harm, he could save humanity by doing good, as the nuns taught through their examples. But what? What singular act of charity could make the world a better place? Paul's eyes travelled up the cracked cinder-block wall above the television set talking about Kennedy to the dusty crucifix. The ultimate betrayal, the ultimate crime. Judas. The Sanhedrin. Pilate washing his hands of the whole mess. Suddenly, he had an idea.

Timeline AY-AYD: Going back a few hours, he managed to emerge from the wormhole on the far side of the stockade, just as the Mossad crew was loading the rifle case back into their trunk. They were surprised to see him. Amusingly so. Paul put up his hands and walked towards them out of the fog. "I give up. Take me back with you, and I'll tell you everything. But not until we're back in Tel Aviv and I can talk to Prime Minister Eshkol personally."

He never would have thought that the same trick would work twice. It wouldn't have, either, if the two Mossad agents hadn't immediately been reassigned for debriefing. Nobody else in 1963 knew how he would escape six years later. Paul wondered why they hadn't anticipated it then, as he reacquired the vortex projector from the secured locker in the Intelligence Division's weapons research department. Of course, he hadn't yet escaped using the future then, so they didn't know what to expect in 1969. He didn't remember helping himself escape by going back to then when he was above it timewise, so at some point he must have been able to go forward again, and that gave him hope. Unless the help had come from otherwhen than himself. The thought that his arrival in 1963 may have triggered the initial Israeli time travel program was frustrating.

The local population was caught up in a rocket scare, so he was able to access the lab by waiting for an air raid he'd located probing backwards. It was already fully charged, and Paul took a deep breath, not knowing whether he was about to dismantle his own molecular structure. His idea was one which Marissa, in her Faith, might have thought of. It would be a jump longer than any he had ever attempted. More than a century, more than a millennium, he

was about to unfurl a dimensional rift deeper and further than any he'd ever imagined. The potential ramifications of the ripple effects were unimaginable. But if he was correct, it would not further divide the space-time continuum. In fact, it might unite it.

It was something that the priest had said about paths, that reminded him of Marissa's faith in God as the creator. If He had created the universe, all universes, the multiverse in all of its' dimensions, then He could look across it and control and comprehend it all. He was the unifying element in all of them. If anyone or anything could undo what Paul had done, and fix what was broken, it was God himself. And there was only one time and place when he could be absolutely sure that his prayers could be heard: he'd talk to God face to face, man to man. That's why he'd had to get here. Within walking distance of the scene of the crime. Donkey distance, at least. He hoped he had set the wormhole exit destination right, or close enough.

Timeline AZ: It was the smell that struck him first, even in mid-air. Unwashed bodies in a Middle Eastern environment. Throngs of them. A half million, without modern sanitation, despite the best efforts of the Roman engineers. Then, he realized that he was falling. The impact knocked the breath out of him, but at least the twenty-five foot impact had ended feet first. Paul felt the small bones in his ankles and feet snap like twigs. The pain shot up his legs,
excruciatingly. He rolled himself to the side as the vortex disappeared above him, unnoticed as anything more than a flash of lightning in the nighttime sky. The darkness had hidden his arrival, otherwise. It took a long time to drag himself to the side of the road. At least he hadn't materialized in the middle of a second story wall. That would have been an interesting end to his journey.

A few months back, each time, had allowed him to learn conversant Aramaic, Hebrew, Latin, and Greek through private tutoring, posing as a Jewish-American immigrant making Aliyah at the newly opened University of Haifa. He had even taken the time to procure an ample supply of shekels in drachma and tetradrachm denominations and proper clothing for the era. He had just forgotten how much the city had been built up over the last two thousand years. The long trip through the vortex had been more like falling than

walking, all the way. The wormhole had pulled him along as if there wasn't much gravity inside, like he was back on the lunar surface, again. Floating through the stars. Paul'd gotten lost in them, forgetting himself and his mission, his source and his destination. The fall at the end hadn't helped his orientation much, nor had the sudden stop at street level. He lost consciousness there on the cobblestones.

The dreams were only of the recent past, of the dusty ride from Haifa to Jerusalem, and the long fall backwards through time. The chatter of the marketplace awoke him, and he recognized different dialects which he barely understood. He lay there for hours, the crowds moving around him like they would any crippled beggar laying in the gutter. A few even dropped chunks of bread and small change into his lap, before he regained enough alertness to cry out for help. Aramaic was sneered at. Hebrew got him ignored. When he tried Latin, Paul finally got some attention.

"Adiuva me, milites!," he called to the bronze-armored soldiers as they passed.

"Q ui in te sunt, lacerare?" the one with the highest plume answered, stepping closer, his hand on his gladius.

"Civis ,ut tu." He replied, trying to keep his speech simple.

" Et loquela tua manifestum est mirum. Unde venistis?" the younger legionnaire asked, curious at the distraction from his duty. He leaned a metal spear, casually.

" Ego sum a Gallia. Ego sum , et accidens nocere ." Paul answered, looking up into the eyes within the frame of the helmet's cheek guards.

They looked at each other, then back at him. "Tu procul a patria pro nobis, ius Longinus?"

The soldier with the javelin didn't answer, but instead squatted down and offered Paul a drink from his water sack.

He'd hallucinated during the long fall back to 30 A.D..Visions of Terri in a

black nightie he'd bought her, the kids at piano recitals and baseball games, and Marissa floating alongside him to keep him
company. His life passed in front of his eyes, unblinking, for however long it took in the amorphous stream of time. He
remembered. Everything.

Part of the impact had been absorbed by the pack when he landed, the projector housing cracking and the steady hum of the vortex generator stopping for the first time since he could remember. The world seemed eerily silent without it. It might just have been completely drained by the jump, or damaged into malfunction. Either way, some enterprising citizen had relieved him of it while he lay half-sitting against the wall for hours. This would be his last trip, any way. It didn't matter. He couldn't have plugged it in anywhere to recharge it, short of a movielike lightning strike, and he was fresh out of DeLoreans, too. Paul tried to imagine what they would make of the pack's contents when they opened it to examine their treasure.

The two legionnaires on patrol accepted his word that he was a Roman citizen, and they were bored with their walk through the market, so they brought a physician who felt of his ankles and the top of his feet, which had swollen to twice their normal size and turned purple. All the local healer could do was bind them up and help the soldiers get him up onto the ass he'd heavily tipped them to buy for him in the livery stalls. It took nearly a week of following the rumors and the crowds to find where the man called Yashua was staying with his disciples.

Getting off of the animal to relieve himself and sleep was easy, he just let the blanket slide sideways with him. Climbing back on required help, and twice he'd been robbed of the coin he held in his hand for anyone passing by who would help him. The angry red streaks had climbed up his legs to his knees, and he was feverish. He stuffed his mouth with flat bread held up by vendors, and dropped coins to them. As Paul rode along the narrow streets he cried out for water to be brought to him, but gourd after gourd failed to quench his thirst.

The simple house of Lazarus in Bethany was crowded enough by the religious leader and his followers, but Paul was not the first to travel out of the city to hear the message for themselves. Along with the faithful and

intrigued came lepers and beggars and the sick, shuffling along the road. It was only a week until Passover, and most of the traffic was going the other direction, headed into Jerusalem. The outbound crowd took to the ditch. Paul was filthy, coughing and choking on dust, when he and his poor beast stumbled into the edge of the crowd trying to peer into the window where the rumored Messiah slept. Finding an empty spot, he untied the knotted cord that held the blanket together, allowing it to loosen, and easing himself down hip-first to the hard-packed ground. The ass stepped sideways, but he let go of the halter rope. It never went very far. Just to the nearest tuft of grass or watering trough.

Those nearest to him, sitting in clusters, scooted away when they saw the black rot of his lower legs, which even he could begin to smell, now. The flesh had split and oozed pus, weeping out of the sodden bindings. Who knew what kind of uncleanness he might have? Paul couldn't blame them. The cancer inside had also returned, he felt, and spread hungrily. All he wanted to do was sleep.

A gasp from the crowd awoke him. He didn't know how long he'd been out, but the sun was higher in the sky. The rough door had opened, and two of the one they called the Christ's disciples, strong men, pushed the crowd to the side to make room. Following them was a man of slightly taller than average height in his mid-thirties, with dark reddish-blonde hair and a beard to match, like many Galileeans. He looked more like the carpenter he had once been, than a Rabbi. But when he looked straight past the dozens of men and women and children scattered around the front of the house and directed his piercing blue-eyed gaze specifically towards the time traveler, Paul could not doubt his power, his righteousness, or his identity. It was Jesus, and he was stepping over people to come straight towards him. Now would be a good time to stand up, if he could. He floundered, trying. No use.

The son of God knelt before him, touching his feet with one hand laid flat, and a coolness spread within them, causing his toes to tingle and vibrate. His eyes remained locked on Paul's, as if reading his memories. Neither looked down or away as the coolness spread upwards, past his knees, up into his chest, clearing his bones and blood and lungs of the leukemia and cancer, too. His legs were whole, as well, he knew, but that was nothing compared to

what he felt happening inside his mind. He tried to speak.

“Shlomoaa,” he began, in Aramaic, Jesus’ native tongue.

“Well, hello to you, too, traveler,” Jesus responded, in 21st century English. Paul figured that he shouldn’t be surprised. “You’ve come a long way, too, haven’t you?”

“Yes, Lord. I…am glad that I was wrong to doubt you were real.” he answered, in his own language, this time. “So glad to be wrong.” Jesus smiled.

“I am, and am. But it’s hard to believe in something you can’t see, I know. And doubt is something we all have.” His face stiffened for an instant. “But you believed enough, somewhere inside, to make that last jump, knowing you couldn’t go back.” Jesus straightened up, then reached down and took Paul by the hand, lifting him to his feet with considerable strength. “Come on inside. We’ve got a lot to talk about, and regardless of what you may think, time is short.”

As they broke their fast and he met the twenty or so others in Lazarus’s house, Jesus reached out and touched the St.
Christopher’s medal hanging from Paul’s neck, looking closely at the image stamped on it. “Oh, I remember him,” he said, before passing the basin of fresh oil and a hunk of bread.

“Cloven clawed grew Miriam, princess of the vale, and her sons after her, though lesser in tooth and temper they. Fewer came the fur bearers with every generation since, though on each full moon it is said that the sanguine flow resumes apace…”

Timeline B: Mindy had been sick off and on for a couple of weeks, leaving Paul to finish up the chapter where the elven queen and the wizard find true love on his own and move to the next subplot, about the werewolf gene’s recessive progression down through the royal house of Hallead. He was running out of ideas about how to bring the two interwoven plots together. It didn’t seem right just to have the lycanthropy be cured like it was a disease with no positive side effects worth keeping. Nor did he want to write it away

as a dream sequence or have them domesticated into super-sized lapdogs. He wished she felt better. It was amazing how much he'd come to rely on her ideas and inspiration for this collaboration, and everything else, come to think of it. Now the deadline was coming up in just a few days, and while he had his doubts about how the book would end, he knew that no matter how much it might hurt to finally declare it finished, a part of him would be relieved. The part that didn't wonder out of insecurity whether she would still want to hang around after it was published. He'd give her a call to see if she needed anything, and how she was feeling. She wasn't very friendly when she felt bad, otherwise he would be trying to force-feed her some chicken soup, right now. Maybe she was part werewolf, too.

She did sound grateful that he called. He printed out the last ten pages he'd pounded out and took them over for her to read, since she was feeling a little better. Hopefully it was nothing contagious. Mindy asked him to pick up a pizza on the way. Chicken soup was for nonfiction writers. Paul ended up staying the night. She really was feeling better.

"High did the arrows of Rondel arc, far did they fly, ere they fell among the pack. Loud did the wails of men cry, while in death they resumed their human shapes. Never would they gnash into elven flesh again, nor rip…" she stopped reading and raised an eyebrow at him. "Have we been channeling Tolkien again? It sounds like Elvish, kind of roughly translated."

"Don't be cruel, little darlin'. Y ou know what I mean? I think you do, I think you do, uhhuh!" he replied, curling his lip and slapping her bare backside. Mindy yelped appreciatively. He reached down and pulled something out of his blue jean pocket on the floor.

" I said it sounds like 'Elvish', not 'Elvis', silly." She gasped as he set a box in front of her. It was small and covered with black velvet. "Wh-what's that, Paul?"

"Open it and see, my precious," he replied, sliding next to her again. There was an inscription in two lines around the inside. Mindy read it, and began to cry.

One ring to show our love,

One ring to bind us,
One ring to seal our love,
And forever to entwine us.
She said yes.
On one condition. Chapter Six
Nahum 1:3, King James Version:

“The LORD *is* slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit *the wicked*: the LORD *hath* his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds *are* the dust of his feet.”

2 Samuel 22:13, King James Version:
“Out of the brightness of his presence bolts of lightning blazed forth.”

Timeline AZ: “So, if you don’t mind me asking, uhm, Sir, what happened back there? Everybody seemed kind of tense. Was it me?” Paul asked Jesus as they waded along with the pedestrian flow. It was only about two miles from Bethany back to Jerusalem. His feet and ankles didn’t hurt at all. He walked it, no problem, along with the rest of them. In fact, he felt better than he could ever remember.

“You? No, don’t worry, it had nothing to do with you, Paul.” Jesus reassured him. It seemed strange, hearing Mid-Western Standard come out of the lamb of God’s mouth as he was from Topeka. “It’s about last night. Mary, she’s Laz’s sister, see, she used some expensive perfumed ointment to wash my feet, you know, which was a sign of great respect, because they aren’t rich, and, well, Judas, my treasurer, thought the money could be better spent feeding the hungry or something, so I had to step in and take sides. It wasn’t a big deal. They’ll get over it.”

Paul looked up at the taller and younger man walking alongside him. “Um, Jesus, there’s something you need to know about that guy…”

Jesus grinned and winked at him. “What, you think I don’t already know?” He confided, and laughed, a low, throaty chuckle. But there still was a shadow of sadness behind His eyes. “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, right?” They quickened their pace as the city walls came into sight, ahead, but they were still in an external suburb.

“Is this Bethphage, Simon?” Jesus asked one of the disciples, a dark-haired man with the weathered face of someone who’d worked outdoors all their life. Several of them had that look about them, Paul noticed, including the two who led the donkey and its’ colt out from a side street for Jesus to ride on, as befitted his station. Simon nodded, wiping his brow, and Jesus clapped him on the shoulder before turning to the new arrivals. “Any trouble with the owner, my brothers?”

“No, Master, it was just like you said. Luke and I told her you needed one, and she told us to take them both.” Paul knew that they must be speaking Aramaic, but in Jesus’ presence every word sounded like plain English to him.

While Jesus climbed up on the shorter animal, the crowds headed into the city began to point and whisper, recognizing him. Many moved out of the road and stood alongside it to watch them pass. It felt like being a part of a parade, or a celebrity’s entourage. Some of them began calling out to Jesus, praising him. A few called him the Messiah, and threw their cloaks onto the road in front of the group. Some of the younger boys cut down palm fronds from trees lining the route further ahead, and ran back to lay them across the stones before them. It seemed kind of a weird thing to do to Paul, so he wasn’t surprised when a handful of robed and ritually costumed priests yelled at the crowd to shut up, then yelled for Jesus to shut them up. Instead, Jesus yelled back at them, ‘If these people didn’t cry out to praise God, the stones of the road themselves would, for them!” Paul thought that would be a more interesting sight to see and hear, but he didn’t say anything out loud, and neither did the priests, after that. Besides, Jesus was staring straight ahead at the city gate, and he must have mixed emotions about going in. He looked kind of like he was going to cry, as a matter of fact. The other disciples noticed the emotional roller coaster their leader was going through, too.

The one who’d been introduced to him as Matthew caught the rope of the colt Jesus was riding and looked up Him curiously, asking if He was okay. Jesus said something like “because the city will not recognize me as the savior, it will soon be completely destroyed”, but He said it directly to Matthew, and Paul more overheard it, than heard it clearly. They continued on, under the wall’s shadow, though. It was a hot day, for the season. There were more

palm branches in front of them, up ahead.

Of course, Jesus wanted to go straight to the temple, which meant that the rest of them went, too. The city wasn't safe for them to stay in at night, so around dusk they retraced their steps back to Bethany. The next day they repeated the process, giving Jesus a chance to teach in the temple again. Paul tried to take it all in, and ask as many questions as possible. Sometimes, though, Jesus answered what he was wondering without being asked.

"A certain man had a rich vineyard, bordering a river, but one day the vineyard began to wither. He knew that the waters of the river must be poisoned, but instead of moving his vineyard and replanting it, he jumped into the river and swam upstream, against the current, to try to find the poison." Jesus said, speaking in a parable to the crowd around the temple, but looking directly at Paul. "At the end of his swim, all he had learned was that the river only flowed in one direction." That night on the way home, he walked faster in order to catch up to the front of the pack and talk to Jesus alone.

"Okay. I've been thinking about it all day. I get the river, it's time. I'm the swimmer. Civilization at my beginning point was the vineyard. Sure. But what are you saying, that we need to move the
vineyard…leave Earth? Colonize
somewhere? The moon? Somewhere else?"

Jesus leaned over towards him,
confidentially. "Where I am, there you can be, too. If it wasn't so, I'd have told you already." He pointed up at the stars. Paul's eyes followed the gesture towards the sky. Just then the edge of his sandal caught a loose rock, and he stumbled forward, almost falling. A good-natured giggle came from Thomas, behind him, who'd almost hit the road hard, too. Jesus caught him by his sleeve and steadied him on his feet. 'But you have to pay attention to where you're going," He joked.

Paul had begun to recognize the internal cliques among Jesus' disciples. Simon, who Jesus called Peter, was almost inseparable from his brother Andrew, and James always sided with his brother, John. The latter two always tried to make sure that they sat next to Jesus. Nobody liked the

Iscariot because he was a money hoarder, and few of them cared for the Paul from Tarsus because he'd been their enemy for so long before his conversion that they didn't really trust him, very much. Matthew hated him the least, perhaps. Mark and Luke tended to go along with what Matthew said, so that balanced things out. Philip and Bartholomew were like brothers, too. It seemed like almost every day two or three of the disciples were off on some errand or another, so rarely were they all together at once. That made it harder to see who was closest to the Messiah. Thomas was very close to Jesus, but not really to many of the others, he was kind of a loner. Then there were the women who followed their group, but they didn't interact much with the men, except for Jesus himself.

Paul thought that Mary, Lazarus's sister, liked him, but he couldn't be sure. It was hard enough reading women from his own millennia. Her eyes reminded him of Marissa's, dark and smoky. Her brother was just creepy. The thought that he was a zombie was always there in the back of Riley's mind, unable to be shaken. Laz was friendly and generous, though. The next morning they got an early start, with the other Paul kicking him awake before breakfast. Judas hadn't come back to Bethany with them, and the former Pharisee was in a foul mood in general over it.

On the way back into town that morning Jesus was out of sorts, too, and hungry like the rest of them. They passed by a fig tree by the road that the Messiah stopped to shake the branches of, but it had already been picked clean by others passing by. In anger, Jesus cursed the tree, saying that it would never bear fruit again. The incident shook Paul, and he somehow knew that it was going to be a bad day. It really was, especially for the profiteers and corrupt money lenders in the temple. His followers watched while the son of God tied leather strips into a scourge and beat them bloody, turning their tables over and scattering their money and the sacrificial birds everywhere, breaking their cages and creating a riot. There were doves flapping around
everywhere while He screamed about them making His house into a den of thieves.

Simon the Zealot, who wanted a reason to fight, laughed as the Lord vented His anger, and urged Him on. Luke finally distracted Him by pointing out a

bunch of cripples gathered there who needed healing, but after He'd laid hands on them just as He had with Paul, a group of kids started cheering Jesus, and calling him 'the son of David'. Every time that kind of thing happened, there were a group of those priests around to tell Him to shut people up, it seemed like. Jesus was calmed down by then, though, and just told them to leave the kids alone, because they were only fulfilling prophecy. Paul didn't know as much prophecy as the disciples did, or even the kids, for that matter, but he did remember enough from Sunday School class to know where this was all headed. Finally, Judas showed up with some small loaves of bread, wine, and smoked fish, so they were able to eat. Nobody asked their treasurer where he had been, but several of them exchanged glances that didn't hold much love for the curly-headed man. On the way back to Bethany that night, Paul tried to warn Jesus again, but it was obvious that the stress was getting to everybody. Including God in man form, who almost bit his head off:

" Enough! Just, leave it alone." Jesus snarled at him. "Watch and learn, that's why you're here, not to change things. Haven't you figured that much out, already? I know what you would tell me, and I appreciate it, but just like you can't change your own past, I can't change my future. It will be as it has to be." His voice softened, along with his face. "There's a reason why this must happen, and I have to be strong enough to endure it. You'll understand, some day. I promise." He turned away, then, talking to John and Matthew quietly about why he had lost his temper with the money lenders in the temple, and the prophecy the children were referring to after he'd healed the cripples. Paul finally gave up and listened in silence. Who had ever had this kind of opportunity, after all? He wished he could write this stuff down, at least. They were almost back before he realized it that, with or without faith, he was firmly a Christian, now. But he had plenty of belief to spare.

On their post-breakfast walk the next day, which was a Sabbath, they noticed that the fig tree had dried up and died. Mark pointed it out, but Jesus just nodded and kept going. Their late morning routine had just commenced when Philip showed up, telling James the Younger and Thaddeus that a group of Greek Israelites, some of the lost sheep of the House of Israel Jesus had repeatedly said that he had come only to save, were asking to see Him. His fame had spread, then. Jesus hugged Philip and loudly yelled that the time

had come for Him to be glorified. Paul wasn't really clear exactly what happened then. Jesus looked up towards the sun and asked God to glorify His own name, which seemed a bit
confusing, until it thundered in broad daylight. Maybe it wasn't actually thunder. Maybe the feeling of vertigo and nausea like he'd felt so often before really did
accompany a loud voice saying the He had and would, and that now was the judgement of the world and the prince of the world would be thrown out. In hindsight it seemed like an awful lot to come from a rolling blast of thunder, but it sure sounded like the same voice who'd told Paul that everything was going to be okay, one time in the distant future. Whatever it was, Jesus said that he needed to be alone, and abandoned most of them to entertain themselves. Several still followed their Lord at a distance for a couple of streets, until He waved them off. To tell the truth, there was a lot of the city that Paul Riley hadn't seen. He walked south with Philip and the other Paul and Mark towards the Huldah Gates where the Greeks were waiting, but Philip continued on alone past the Hippodrome, which the other three stopped to marvel at.

"They sure can build, can't they?" the Paul from Tarsus said to Riley, since they were both outsiders there, but the time traveler had trouble finding the right words to answer in Hebrew without sounding like a barbarian, so he fell back into his role as a Gaul, and stammered back that it was a great building, for sure. His clumsy syntax earned him a suspicious glance, but it had been far too strange a day for anyone to be upset over accents. None of them seemed to be eager to talk about it, though. They walked in relative silence together down Herodian Street to the pool of Siloam. Jesus had once healed a blind man there, but today they just washed their hands and feet and splashed some water on their faces before trudging down to the lower city, across the narrow Kidron Valley, and back towards Bethany. They made it back before He did, still.

That night, he dreamed of Marissa, but not the kind of dream that he wanted or expected. In it, she chided him for not understanding, of all people, why sometimes a sacrifice had to be made for the greater good. Jesus' coming execution was
necessary for the redemption of His people. Not just so that no more doves

would have to flutter around the temple doomed. So that they could be forgiven. So that they could be saved. Dr. Harris had warned Paul about developing a Messiah complex. Maybe he had just dreamed or hallucinated that, since it made more sense for Marissa as base counselor to have gone all psychoanalytic on him, than the scientist. Now he understood exactly what he had meant. Or her.
Martyrdom had its privileges. Before the Romans took over, the method of execution for blasphemy had been stoning. Paul fell back asleep, imagining two thousand years of people wearing rocks around their necks.

The priests were always easy to spot. Their shawls, as he thought of them, and funny hats set them apart from the scribes and other Temple officials. Jesus spent all the next day sparring with them verbally. The debate tended to center on whether or not He was claiming to be God, or the son of God, or Elisha or another prophet, or not. Even with Jesus near and the wordplay clearly translated for him, the indirectness of the debate and skirting the issue frustrated Paul. He couldn't understand why they couldn't just see who He was, or why He couldn't just say it. Instead, the Pharisees confronted the disciples and challenged Jesus' authority to teach. Finally, after listening to it all day, they left the Temple area and headed out of the city, towards the Mount of Olives. As he turned his back on the elders, Jesus said that the Temple would be destroyed, soon. As silly as they were, the priests probably took that as a threat. Caiaphas, the high priest, looked like he was about to blow a gasket. His face was red and the veins were standing out in his neck. Even the Romans had to tread carefully around him, he had so much influence and power. That was one dangerous, upset man.

At least there was a cool breeze up on the ridge, and the stink of Jerusalem could be forgotten. They sat around sitting on their cloaks, snacking on figs and bread while Jesus talked about things that would happen in the future, before He returned to establish a Kingdom. None of them were things Paul could remember happening, but then, prophecies were often not very specific or clear. His feet hurt from all of the walking, even though they had been healed, but his lungs felt young and strong again. Probably it was just getting used to wearing sandals. James and John argued with the others about who loved Jesus most. It was the same, childish, boring argument. Jesus told them to shut up until they got to Heaven and found out. Judas had stayed in the city

again, handling some business or other for the next day, and Paul of Tarsus asked why.
Matthew, trying to get the conversation back on track, asked for clarification about whether the Earth would be destroyed before He came back, and Jesus explained that he was only talking about an end of the age, not the end of everything, but that things would get so bad that if He didn't come back, all would be lost. Judging by what he'd seen happening on Earth from Luna One, Paul could believe it.

"Master?" he asked, hesitantly, almost raising his hand like a kid in school. Jesus stopped what He was saying about the ending of the age, and nodded to him.

"How would the people perish, if you did not return?" he questioned. Jesus laughed. Paul of Tarsus was soaking up every word.

"You have seen it, and know as well as I. You have been told how my Father made man and woman, and told them to be fruitful and multiply?" They all nodded, ready for another parable.

"Well, those people before Adam were like the beasts of the field, and there was no one to run things on this planet. So, He made Adam, which means 'to show blood in the face', 'to blush', because of the color of his skin, different from those who came before him. Also, my Father breathed his own breath and spirit into Adam, different from all other living things. Adam had a soul, and those descended from him do, too, unless like the potter who mixes sand into the clay, they are made impure through adultery, and cannot hold a spirit, just as a vessel of mixed clay cannot hold water." Matthew was thinking hard about this, Paul noticed. So was Paul of Tarsus, one of the youngest of the group who'd been converted by a blinding light as a junior Pharisee a few years earlier.

"So we are told that Noah of all men was saved from the flood because he was pure in his generations," Luke added, following the direction the sermon was going.

"Absolutely!" Jesus confirmed, smiling at him. And the seed of the serpent, those who cry out for my blood today, will work to destroy the covenant

between the House of Israel and my Father tomorrow."

"How will they do that, Master? God will not break His covenant with His people," Paul of Tarsus wondered aloud, looking doubtful.

"Ah, but what if they are no longer His people?" Jesus offered, rhetorically.

"So, the Israelites, and all descendants of Adam, would be destroyed through becoming mixed with other peoples, if you did not come again?" Riley asked.

"Exactly. Those who are descended from Cain and his father the serpent who seduced Eve, and from the people he went to in the land of Nod, would triumph." Jesus confirmed. "That is the reason for the law against intermarrying."

"But Master," asked Thomas, looking at Paul of Gaul doubtfully, "Are the Gauls, or the Romans, or the Greeks or Teutons… of Adam?"

"Of Adam, and of Abraham, my friend." Thomas smiled at the familiarity. "Over six hundred years ago, their ancestors were taken into captivity from among our fathers. Since then they have wandered north and west into new lands, forgetting who they were often, but never becoming other than who they are: the lost sheep of the House of Israel." They each turned to look at Paul with a new openness, as if he was welcome, after all. He didn't remember THAT in the New Testament where he'd come from.

It was only two days before Passover. Barnabas and Philip arrived as they walked back towards Bethany, since it was getting late in the day. Instead of staying with Lazarus again, though, they visited Simon the leper…well, the former leper, and stayed with him that night. One of Jesus' female fans anointed his head with an expensive jar of perfume, causing some of the disciples who'd been infected with Judas's worrying about money to complain about the waste. Philip and Barnabas, having missed the day's sermon and discussion, grumbled most. Jesus fussed at them for being petty again, and told them all that she was preparing him for burial, like she would a corpse. That shut them up. Everybody looked shocked, and a little concerned about all the negativity. The Iscariot himself was still gone, and didn't show up the next day either, while the rest of them were sent off

running errands to arrange for the feast and the room they'd celebrate Passover in.

Everything seemed dusty, dirty, sweaty, and stank. Even the rich people smelled, they just covered it up head to toe with perfume, which sometimes was worse, Paul thought. Personal hygiene wasn't really a priority. Most adults had some missing teeth, and facial scars from acne. The women looked prematurely aged, too. It was kind of a let down. He tried to shake it off and pay attention to what really mattered. Jesus spent a lot of time talking to Paul of Tarsus, alone. He'd been doing that a lot.

They all headed back into Jerusalem for the Passover meal, which for once all of them were there at one time to eat together. It seemed like a solemn thing, and didn't look at all the way Da Vinci had painted it. The upstairs room was nearly full, with the outer circle of followers packed in,
including the women. Jesus' mother, who usually kept to herself or talked to the other females, sat with Mary Magdalene behind her son, who led the ceremony. Paul watched her, out of curiosity. The mother of God was a small, sad looking woman easing past middle age. She kept her eyes on Jesus, obviously worried. The other Mary beside her did, too, but more in adoration than maternal care. She'd been the one aside from Peter most put out when Jesus had washed all of their feet earlier, in a reversal of the normal roles. It had seemed weird at the time to Paul, too, knowing what he knew, what all of them should know, but maybe didn't really, yet, about who Jesus was. Maybe they were just too close to what was going onto understand the importance of it.

After the symbolic breaking of the unleavened bread and the first toast of wine, platters of fruit, followed by the lamb, made the rounds. Mark and Luke helped serve the meat. Paul kept thinking about how the blessing had sounded like a sad goodbye. Simon Peter seemed upset that he was seated farthest away from Jesus, while Judas got to be on the Lord's left, where the best friend was supposed to be. This caused some whispering among the others, especially since John got to sit to the right of Jesus, in the most honored position. Paul "of Gaul", as they called him, was in the outer circle, but he could see and hear most of what was said. Most of it was surprisingly similar to what he remembered from The Lord's Supper. "This do in

remembrance of me", and "love one another".

Things got a bit awkward when Jesus made the announcement that one of them would betray him. Everybody wanted to know who he meant, but was afraid to ask, until Peter motioned for John to ask Jesus who it was. Every eye in the place was on the center of the table, and it was deathly quiet. Jesus said "The person I give this to," then wrapped a chunk of lamb meat in a piece of the flat bread, kind of like a fajita, Paul thought, and passed it to Judas. John and Peter definitely knew what was going on, but the rest of them seemed confused. Now, they were all asking aloud at once who it was, so Judas said something that he couldn't quite make out, Jesus answered, and Judas got up and left, into the night. Paul had a good idea of where he was heading, and which direction, since the house they were eating in was just outside the old city walls.

Simon Peter and John watched him go, their eyes full of hatred. Peter made as if to get up and go after him, his hand on his sword, but Jesus stopped him with a shake of his head. Looking at their interaction, Paul remembered what Marissa had told him, during one of their late night
discussions about faith. He had asked her if there was any contemporary evidence of what Jesus looked like, and she had said yes, then taken a moment to do an interwebs search to say the name of the author correctly. The Roman Consul, Lentalus, stationed in Judaica, had written a report to Emperor Tiberius about a condemned man named Jesus of Nazareth: "a noble and lively face, with fair and slightly wavy hair; black and strongly curving eyebrows, intense penetrating blue eyes and an expression of wondrous grace. His nose is rather long. His beard is almost blonde, although not very long. His hair is quite long, and has never seen a pair of
scissors…..His neck is slightly inclined, so that he never appears to be bitter or
arrogant. His tanned face is the color of ripe corn and well proportioned. It gives the impression of gravity and wisdom,
sweetness and good, and is completely lacking in any sign of anger." Except for the black and curving eyebrows part, Lentalus had gotten it pretty much right. That face was now sad, and Jesus motioned for Peter to stay seated.

"Even if the rest of them all turn on you, I won't, not ever," Peter said,

angrily looking around at the rest. Paul of Tarsus nodded in agreement.

Jesus smiled at him, shrugging his shoulders, and answered, “Peter, this very night, before the rooster crows three times in the morning, you’ll deny knowing me to save yourself.”

Peter shook his head “No, I’ll die with you, first.” Jesus sighed deeply.

“You and James and John can go with me, I need to pray. Bring your sword, if you want. The rest of you take care of things here. Then go get some rest. Tomorrow will be hard on all of you.” It didn’t seem like a very upbeat way to end the evening.

By the time confused word reached them the next morning in Bethany about what had happened, it was too late to do anything. At least, that’s what the general consensus was, but it felt like an excuse. Peter and John and Mary were missing. So were Mary
Magdalene and several other women who’d stayed together. Martha was afraid for them to stay in her house, and the rest of the disciples seemed about evenly divided between those who expected Jesus to destroy his enemies and emerge victorious, and those who were already leaving to hide somewhere away from the city. Paul of Gaul sat by himself, listening to the contradictory reports, until he couldn’t stand it any longer. He had to go watch it happen for himself.

It wasn’t hard to make his way to Golgotha, northwest and uphill from the Temple. He found John and the women there in the shadow of the cross. His nerves were so shot that he couldn’t keep his brain from dredging up the scene from the end of Monty Python’s ‘Life of Brian’. Jesus, bleeding and gasping for air in between words, spoke to his mother and John, while Paul waited his turn. Finally, Mary bowed her head, and was led a short distance away. Jesus closed his eyes for a minute, then opened them and raised his head enough to look at him. For a minute, neither of them said anything. Paul hardly knew where to begin. Blood dripped on his left leg from above, running down his shin to his foot. Of course the crucified man knew what he was thinking.

“I get it, now,” he offered. Jesus winked at him, wincing at the pain.

“Good. I almost broke down last night, before they came. I asked to be given a pass,” he admitted.

“I remember reading that. But you accepted His will. And you know He hasn’t forsaken you. He can’t. You’re Him, His son, and One.”

“Thanks.” Jesus nodded, halfway, his head drooping again. The blood had unclotted from the movement and flowed from his brow. “I know. I just had to remember. I feel it all, every sin ever. All of the guilt forever.” His shoulders sagged at the end of every shallow breath. “And I met the two lost Pauls.”

“Thank you,” was all that Paul could think of to say. He took a step forward, to reach up and place a comforting hand on the leg of his savior, but the Centurion in charge of the soldiers motioned him back.

Jesus was speaking again. “No matter how bad things look, then or now, remember that in the end, we win.” Paul thought that was for him, too. Mary was stepping forward again, so Paul stepped out of her way, to let her look at her son. He and John exchanged looks and nods. The other man was crying, too.

Down the hill he ran, trying not to step in the trail of blood Jesus had left on the way up. As he ran out of breath and stopped to lean against the Temple wall to catch his breath, thunder and lightning split the air around him, followed by the familiar smell of burnt ozone. Hot metal like space. He turned around and looked up at the Temple entrance. A temporal vortex had opened, ripping open the heavy woven curtain hiding the inner court from sight. It now lay exposed from floor to ceiling. Paul began walking up the steps, his eyes transfixed by the wormhole that spiraled outwards from the Ark of the Covenant.

Timeline B: In order for her parents to feel good about them getting married, Mindy asked Paul to at least go through the motions of converting to Catholicism. He figured that going to the daily classes were as much for her benefit as it was to placate her Irish Catholic parents, so he happily consented. Each day after studying the oneness of the trinity, the stations of the cross, and the rosary, he volunteered for a couple of hours at the homeless

shelter kitchen next door. It was something to do while he waited for her to get off work at Trident. He couldn't write without her any more, anyway, so he might as well do something productive. Hopefully once they got married she would agree to quit, and they could spend all of their time writing together.

There was something solid and
substantial about the freshly painted cinderblock walls that comforted him. It wasn't just the dignified, silent nuns ladling out instant mashed potatoes and Salisbury steak, or the prominent crucifix in the back of the congregation hall near the door. He really felt a serenity here, a calm assurance. This place was the architectural embodiment of faith. The smiling face of the former Parish priest, who'd passed away in 1963, welcomed everyone who entered, right before they met the current Father.

In the evenings and on weekends they labored together to finish off their first and last collaborative wood-elf book. It was about ready for the first proof, then they'd agreed to focus on something less
fantastical. A fictional re-telling of the lives of the Saints, she had suggested. Well, if that was next, he guessed he was in the right place for it. There were so many of them, though, it was hard to keep track of them. Multiple Johns, Simons, and Pauls
abounded.

As he rolled his sleeves up and dug into the pile of dirty trays, spraying them down, soaping them up, scrubbing them, then rinsing them off, it gave him time to think about writing, and science fiction, and saints, and 'A Canticle for Leibowitz'. What might the church look like in the future, once people got off planet? Might there be new Saints, for new worlds they would colonize?

Chapter Seven

Ezekiel Chapter One, King James Version:

" 4 Then I looked, and behold, a whirlwind was coming out of the north, a great cloud with raging fire engulfing itself; and brightness *was* all around it and radiating out of its midst like the color of amber, out of the midst of the fire. 5 Also from within it *came* the likeness of four living creatures. And this *was* their appearance: they had the likeness of a man. 6 Each one had four faces, and each one had four

wings. 7 Their legs *were* straight, and the soles of their feet *were* like the soles of calves' feet. They sparkled like the color of burnished bronze. 8 The hands of a man *were* under their wings on their four sides; and each of the four had faces and wings. 9 Their wings touched one another. *The creatures* did not turn when they went, but each one went straight forward.
the spirit wanted to go, and they did not turn when they went.

10 As for the likeness of their faces, *each* had the face of a man; each of the four had the face of a lion on the right side, each of the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and each of the four had the face of an eagle. 11 Thus *were* their faces. Their wings stretched upward; two *wings* of each one touched one another, and two covered their bodies. 12 And each one went straight forward; they went wherever

13 As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance *was* like burning coals of fire, like the appearance of torches going back and forth among the living creatures. The fire was bright, and out of the fire went lightning. 14 And the living creatures ran back and forth, in appearance like a flash of lightning.
22The likeness of the firmament above the heads of the living creatures *was* like the color of an awesome crystal, stretched out over their heads. 23And under the firmament their wings *spread out* straight, one toward another. Each one had two which covered one side, and each one had two which covered the other side of the body. 24 When they went, I heard the noise of their wings, like the noise of many waters, like the voice of the Almighty, a tumult like the noise of an army; and when they stood still, they let down their wings. 25A voice came from above the firmament that *was* over their heads; whenever they stood, they let down their wings.

15 Now as I looked at the living creatures, behold, a wheel *was* on the earth beside each living creature with its four faces. 16 The appearance of the wheels and their workings *was* like the color of beryl, and all four had the same likeness. The appearance of their workings *was*, as it were, a wheel in the middle of a wheel. 17 When they moved, they went toward any one of four directions; they did not turn aside when they went. 18 As for their rims, they were so high they were awesome; and their rims *were* full of eyes, all around the four of them. 19When the living creatures went, the wheels went beside them; and when the living creatures were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up. 20Wherever the spirit wanted to go, they went, *because* there the spirit went; and the wheels were lifted together with them, for the spirit of the living creatures *was* in the wheels. 21When those went, *these* went; when those stood, *these* stood; and when those were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up together with them, for the spirit of the living creatures*was* in the wheels.

26 And above the firmament over their heads *was* the likeness of a throne, in appearance like a sapphire stone; on the likeness of the throne *was* a likeness with the appearance of a man high above it. 27 Also from the appearance of His waist and upward I saw, as it were, the color of amber with the appearance of fire all around within it; and from the appearance of His waist and downward I saw, as it were, the appearance of fire with brightness all around. 28Like the appearance of a rainbow in a cloud on a rainy day, so *was* the appearance of the brightness all around it. This *was* the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD."

Timeline ZA: Paul knew that the Ark of the Covenant had been a communications device, a way to speak to God directly. It had been a weapon, slaying whole armies of their enemies. It had also accidentally killed those who had touched it without going through the proper protocols. The Ark had disappeared, sometimes for years at the time, leading people to assume that it had been lost in Babylonia or Egypt, before reappearing again. As he stepped into the mist it generated and felt his body begin to come apart into the firefly tornado, he had no idea where he was going, or when. He might end up at the birth of the universe, or its death, at the creation of the Earth, or its destruction, or anywhere or anywhen in between. He'd already seen the most important time and place, for his species. For his race. For his people, and his faith. What was there left to do?

The fog enveloped him, he breathed it in, and it breathed him out, much more completely, quickly, and gently than the man-made device had ever done. Like a feather in the wind he floated forward, picking up speed at the other end, falling out of the wormhole not where he had been born, or where he had last jumped from, but right back where he had first started. Or, close enough, anyway. His head struck the corner of the desk by his bunk, and he rolled over onto the floor of his berth, his eyes fluttering. Awakeness receded, only to return some undetermined amount of time later when the intercom buzzed. It was the Chief.

"Paul, you need to come see this! Observation room, quick," she ordered, then she was gone.

He must have rolled out of bed, and had a terrible dream, lying there on the hard plastic floor. Bits and pieces of it floated around, still, in his head. Wait until he told Teresa about meeting Jesus, what a kick she'd get out of that. Certain parts of the dream he'd better keep to himself, though, of course. He wouldn't want her or the ships' counselor to know what his sleeping mind had been up to. It was still kind of confusing, he thought drowsily. Maybe he'd hit his head harder than he realized.

The Chief was already there as he stumbled in, still struggling with his uniform. She had raised the International Space Station in its' near Earth orbit between them, to verify that they knew what was going on. With their fifty-six personnel on board, nearly half the number in the Armstrong Station

habitat moon base with a tenth of the space, they were more vulnerable to resupply issues if the diplomatic situation down there deteriorated. From what they were seeing, it might…but then again, things might be taking an upswing, for good.

All of the representative heads had been summoned. Leaders of the Greater Reich, the New American Republic, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and even Rhodesian delegations were arriving, some alone and others in groups and pairs. A cluster of children ran down the hall from level B's kindergarten complex. Shrieking playfully, they were oblivious to what was happening far below them.

In sheets and connected strings, the lights were going out over most of the EurAsian continent. Everything east of the Urals was going black as one interconnected power grid after another crashed. The bankruptcy of the rump Soviet state had finally reached its terminal point. Communism was dying before their eyes, after seventy years of depression and defeat.

The lights blinked out beneath them, sometimes one by one in relays like reverse fireworks, but more often in sheets, as whole electric networks collapsed.

"For behold, d arkness shall cover the Earth, and thick darkness the peoples," somebody said quietly from behind him on the observation deck. Probably Marisa, she was the one most likely to quote scripture at a time like this, though they all knew chapter and verse. Especially of Isaiah. A nervous giggle followed from the back. He couldn't blame the Greater Reich personnel, especially, for feeling happy. They'd been losing sons fighting Commie terrorists on the Eastern Front for three generations. Now, it was finally ending.

The communications channel was still open with Mission Control, carrying the sounds of applause and cheering from Crockett, the New American Space Command headquarters. They were watching an old enemy capsize, too. The Chief was trying to talk to them, but with the loud talk going on above and below, she was having to stick a finger in her free ear and squint to hear the director. Paul turned around to face the Armstrong group.

“Alright, folks, show's over for now. We all have jobs to do. Let's go back to our stations, and we can talk about it tomorrow at the staff meeting. Oheight hundred.”

Grudgingly, taking another look at their old home, they slowly marched out. Some cast glances at him over their shoulders, and he nodded reassuringly. There would be a lot of people late to roll-call tomorrow, after tonight’s celebrations.

On a small converted fishing trawler anchored at a pier off Madagascar, the Ashkenazi Colony’s top academic
researcher and his three Novosibirsk educated scientists watched the grid around Omsk go dark on their satellite hack feed. There’d be no more funding of their project, or their nation, from the C.C.C.P.. Already reports had begun of the wholesale burning of Jewish communities in what was left of Russia, as civil control collapsed. Operation Golem had to go forward now, while they still had the power to attempt it. Enough to go back 2,000 years. The two volunteers, both zealots from the secret police which ruled the Jewish island with an iron fist, had dressed in their European business attire and placed the device in a briefcase. They stepped up on deck and opened the lid, aiming the open mouth at the pier. They had to infiltrate Christianity at its earliest roots. Their target was a young Pharisee who needed to be confronted and interrogated about his anti-Semitism, before he
converted. Moments later they stepped into the mist, intent on stopping this from happening. This was not how things were supposed to be.

Timeline B: Paul couldn’t believe how beautiful she looked, even through the veil. Mindy stood before him, her fingers slightly trembling in his hand, as he slipped the new ring handed to him by Jonesy, his best man, on to rest above the inscribed one. They had written and exchanged their own vows as a part of their covenant marriage commitment. The priest, Father Harris, smiled and blessed them both. Then the party started.

Most of the staff of Trident Publications were present, and had all been very impressed by the vows he’d written. They kept saying so. Coming from a group of writers and literary reviewers, that was high praise, indeed. Teresa from Artistic
Development gave them both hugs and told Mindy how much she would

miss working with her. Even Marissa, the head of the historical fiction genre subdepartment, was there and congratulated them. She'd always blocked his project ideas before, and Mindy had said that she was difficult to work with, too. He guessed someone who spent all of her time reading conspiracy theory novels about the JFK assassination just couldn't get a handle on Fantasy. She always tried to psychoanalyze why he wanted to write them. Even here, she couldn't let it go completely. Maybe he should write romance novels, she quipped. Maybe THEY should, he'd returned, holding Mindy close. The newlyweds danced the first song together, a slow one, and he held her even closer. She nestled her face into his neck and smiled. Paul smelled her hair. All felt right with the world. This was exactly how things were supposed to be.

Afterwords

Writing a time travel novel, well, it's a staple. In fact, it's been done to death, sometimes better than others. Writers with a particular political ideology to promote, including, admittedly, this one, have tended to use the science fiction genre and the 'deus ex machina' of changing the past to rewrite history according to their own preferences. One of the masters of alternate history writing, Harry Turtledove, is infamous for using the meme to point out continually how bad and rotten and not nice National Socialism and racism are. So much so that it's become pedantic and gotten in the way of his narrative skills. I hope that readers haven't found my contrary efforts here to be quite as lecturing or condescending.

Because my purpose is not obscurity, I've annotated the Timeline change with each shift: for example, "Timeline A", "Timeline B", et cetera. Now, because there are so many jumps involved to different timelines, after the first 26 the alphanumeric
designations double, and start over again, making the visit with Jesus, not unintentionally, Timeline AZ, as He is "the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." The repeatedly referred to "Timeline B", for those who had not guessed it, is our own.

Timeline AZ, with two extra Pauls, Saul of Tarsus who converted early and became one of Jesus' disciples, and Paul of Gaul, himself; the subtle interactions of whom led to a more obviously racial (Christian Identity)

discussion and sermon on the Mount of Olives, recorded by Paul of Tarsus in THAT timeline's New Testament, which creates an alternate reality in that Timeline ZA where Germany wins W.W. II after exiling the Jews to Madagascar. The Jews going back into time from their Madagascar ZA timeline created the ripple effect that blinded Saul a decade before the road to Damascus event and led to his conversion in AZ, a paradox loop. That's implied but not explicit in the text. A blinding light appeared to him, and out of it he was asked, "Why do you persecute me?"

It all fits, and makes perfect sense. I promise. Go back and read the confusing bits over again, if you need to, and you'll see. It's okay, I'll wait right here. Go on. Time travel back to where the plot lost you, then come back here.

See? I told you so. But, is this the exact same place that you left from to go back? Are you sure? How can you be? It's not like you'd remember, if it wasn't. Unless you experienced a bit of déjà vu.

So the protagonist never makes it back home, or he never leaves. You really can never recapture a lost moment, pull back in a word you wished you'd never said, or moot your regrets. The greatest things we have is forgiveness and faith, and those come from God. We need to try to give them to each other more often, too.

Voltaire wrote through Dr. Pangloss in 'Candide' that "we live in the best of all possible worlds", but as that was satire, he didn't really believe it, and neither do I.

This could have been a longer book. In fact, once one begins talking about things they could change in the past, and how those changes might affect the future, the
possibilities are endless. Witness the success of movies such as "The Butterfly Effect". However, my intention was to do several things: explain the Christian Identity message in its most basic form, without being preachy, broad-brush the failures of the modern multi-racial state, and express my own values, being among them. This didn't require a series or anthology of works. I tried to keep it bite-sized and accessible for readers who might be familiar with the genre, as well as those who are not. Did I succeed? You be the judge.

Also available from this author:

“Hasten the Day”

It’s this time, next year. Hyperinflation, the collapse of the dollar, and economic depression have America on the ropes, when uncontrolled illegal immigration delivers a sucker punch to the glass jaw of multiracial democracy. Race riots and secessions lead to ethnic cleansing and Balkanization. ‘Hasten The Day’ chronicles the first year after the breakup of the United States into several independent nations. If you believe that what cannot fly must fall, you won't want to miss reading "Hasten The Day"!

“Look Away”

In 'Look Away, an alternate history of the Civil War', history hangs by a thread. A single moment can create ripples which change everything. What if Mary Todd Lincoln had a bad night's rest? A harsher Emancipation Proclamation causes slave revolts, reprisals, and a different end to the South's invasion of Pennsylvania. Intervention by European powers on both sides of the conflict transform the American Civil War into The Great War, with global repercussions for everyone involved!

“Glome’s Saga”

It’s a thousand years ago. Guess who’s coming to dinner? This first person narrative historical fiction novel is inspired by Erik The Red’s Saga and the Greenlander’s Saga, as well as similar old Norse tales, and the Heavener runestone(s) in Oklahoma. Follow Glome's life struggle in his own words as he travels from early 11th century Norway to England, Ireland, Iceland, Greenland, and North America. This rollicking Viking adventure about the Norse exploration and attempted colonization of the new land is filled with action, intrigue, and drama, as well as the dark humor typical of the age. For more science fiction adventure by Billy Roper, here is an excerpt from his recently released alien contact novel, ‘Remnants’:

Chapter One Ghost Feet

There were times when he thought very seriously of just quitting the force

and writing a book about all of the messed up stuff he'd seen. Not that it would ever be printed. It wouldn't make it past the censors. Besides, books were too expensive and rare, and what collector would buy one about him? Or who would believe it, even if they knew it was true? That was the thing about people, Rod thought to himself as he hovered in traffic gridlock above and below. Even if they knew something was true, even if they felt it in their guts, they could deny it until they were monoxide blue. It was a neat trick. Still, there were times...like last night, around two am, when he'd caught the job of scooping up a young girl who never should have been on the side of town they found her littering. Just because she was the wrong
complexion to be facedown in an alley behind the Adult Emporium didn't mean she hadn't ended up there, just like private firearms being illegal hadn't kept her from
developing a couple of clean holes in the back of her naturally yellowcurled head, where her neural implant had been jacked. They hadn't been so pretty coming out. Uniforms were still spraying her off of the asphalt so the ehookers didn't stain their plastiplex knees.

He had seen a lot like that,
especially on MLK Drive, over the last decade of the twenty-second century. Here lately, though, more and more of them had been 'privies'. Normally the name was used politely to refer to the diminishing minority of Whites in general, but it got worse. Like the last three, she'd been blonde. Detective Lee had been keeping score. Somebody was targeting the Whitest of the Whites. Not that the reports said so, of course. That would be anti-filing. But he kept a running tally in his head. It's what gave him the edge, as far as the department knew. That, and actually reading the reports, something the other cops gave him a hard time for. "Acting Privie", they called it. If they only knew.

His last name being "Lee", combined with his listed fluency in Mandarin that he'd picked up doing two tours in the P.R.C., the last in Harbin before they'd turned it over to the Russians, had helped him pass as a quota fill. Officially, he was the only Asian in the C.I.D.. Unofficially, he dyed his hair black, wore brown contact lenses, shoved up cheek inserts, and kept them guessing. There were so many different hybrids floating around the city that he could almost count on never getting called on it. When asked, Rod had always just

said that he was named after the first lady President by his mom. She'd been a history buff, which even then had been frowned upon. It was a true story, as far as it went. The government had picked up the tab for his prenatal screening, and his dad hadn't been around, so his mom had figured, 'why not?'. Rod didn't much care, it was just a label to him, and labels confined you, they cut you off and pigeon-holed you into somebody else's expectations. If his label had been Rod Riguez, he would have already made Sergeant, that was for sure. Maybe Chief. He was glad to be spared that, at least.

The thinly padded seat reclined back at his command, and following his preferences his department issued data app disengaged and the external vidcom played the news loop while he sat in stasis, waiting for the vertical to clear around the highscrapers. The popup blocker was buffering again, causing pixilated girls fondling
dextrose tabs to dance before his face. Since he wasn't on street duty he got to wear his neural out of the office, but the old fashioned feed was easier on his nerves than the internal. The news muttered on. Indonesia was threatening to embargo Australia's oil supply, and the U.N. refused to
intervene because Melbourne had already passed their green initiative petroleum usage allotment for the year. The Vatican announced that Pope Mary the Second would be visiting with Catholic missionaries in Germany to discuss the difficulties they were facing conforming to Sharia law there. Tensions were high once again in the Middle East as Israeli fundamentalists continued to build new settlements along the Euphrates, in direct violation of the New
Baghdad Accords. Rod requested "Sports", and listened to highlights of the Washington First People's
crushing of New York in last night's game. He'd missed it doing late cold casework until he'd gotten the call about the most recent dead girl.

Finally the gridlock loosened up as the cloud cover broke, and the
autodriven flighters made their way burbwise. A central cluster of hundred story buildings dwarfed the ancient governmental structures they ringed, like manmade mountains around a valley. Rod accelerated to level three, outbound, and angled in to merge as the last of the green receded behind him. They were supposed to yield. Nobody ever yielded. By the three Bushes, if

he turned on his lights, he bet they'd yield! He was tempted to do just that, but one more reprimand for misuse of authority and he'd be stuck on graveyard shift all month. He'd miss the whole playoffs. Like a good citizen, he patiently waited for an opening. By the time one could be halfway imagined and brought to fruition by some offensive driving techniques they hadn't taught at the academy, his stomach was growling. Rod realized he hadn't eaten since the call had come in. That had been nearly five hours ago, since this was morning rush hour traffic he was fighting the wrong way now, like a sick but horny trout trying to swim upstream to breed and die. While the songfinder scanned he voice-dialed in an order and picked it up from the deliverdrone as his two year old Chevy Consensus did its job and automatically intercepted the pod. For once, it even tasted like real synthsteak. There was a picture of a cartoon cow on the box, for the majority of citizens who couldn't or didn't read, but he doubted whatever was inside had ever been within a thousand kilometers of any pasture in the flyovers.

The domi was a simple two room corner flat on the sixteenth floor, just one lift away from the parking deck. He liked the convenience of not having to be in the open for too long, usually, but the air was better the higher up you went. Some day he hoped to move on up to the higher levels, but he was okay staying put for now. Really, it had all he needed: vidcom, couch, shower, composter, fridge and waver. He stayed away from unregulated webfeeds, even though he could have gotten away with it. Some of his buddies in the division gave him a hard time about not getting a bigger place further out, towards the edge of the blue zone, but an hour each way was plenty of flighttime for him. Besides, they were pad-cases to get married and have their approved offspring parameters and die that way. He knew better. A cop could get fired at any time for any reason, and never work again, especially if they were, as he was assumed to be, part privie.

Rod saved every credit he could, with the dream of one day retiring and moving to Alaska. A whole Autonomous Republic of flyover country. He had fantasies of popping out his contacts and showing the local immigration board how well he could speak Russian, too. Well, everybody had to have something to work towards, and look forward to. That was his cluster of grapes. If that made him a traitor, so be it.

Living in the nation’s capitol coul d do that to you, force you to look outwards, and not just for the
commute, either. Being that close to the centers of old and corrupted bluezone power was as bad as
inhaling black mold. It tore out your soul and weakened your body like the heat from the radioactive Punjab. Not that most people living in the District could find it on the map. Either place, for that matter. But the Punjab was worse.

Rod Lee knew all about that. He had done his second tour on twin struts of injection-molded aluminum after an Indian insurgent had mistaken him, quite understandably, for a Chinese-American soldier. That particular combination was a triple zinger irritant for the terrorists, or freedom fighters, depending on whom you asked. It’s not like he didn’t understand why the twelve year old kid had ran up and hugged him
around the knees and blown herself to Nirvana. It was just kind of ironic, in a detached sort of way. The Private had come to think of it like that in the field hospital, where they had
unsedated him long enough to give him the long face and ask him why his DNA profile was anomalous. That was when he’d almost been caught, like the eighteenth and nineteenth century women who had joined the army to be close to their boyfriends or husbands, and been wounded and found out. He had less to hide than they had, but his clearly Europid genome was just as openly in plain sight. It had taken a partially feigned and temporary emotional breakdown over the loss of his legs punctuated by accusations of Mongolophobia to get the nursebots to leave the DNA results unremarked in his file. Losing his legs was the least of his worries. If they’d marked him as White, he’d have been Dolezaled and disgraced, if not courtmartialed. Instead, they’d promoted him to Corporal and sent him North with a purple heart and an opiate addiction. At least he’d been in the right place for it. Smack central. Talk about flyover, that was it. Central fringe.

That had been nearly, what, fourteen years ago, now? He’d solved a lot of cases, specializing in out of the box theories that turned out to be right more often than not, since then. Rod had also gone through years under the needle offduty in
Chinatown to complete the half Asian persona with a veneer of swirling ink.

They had despised him, but still taken his money. Sometimes the mirror made him feel like more coy than man. His mid-thirties were skating by and he hadn't had a girl who didn't plug in or a night without the sweats and shakes since the PRC. The veteran restaffing bill had helped him get past the fitness requirements to join the force, through its anti
discrimination clause. His 'mobility difference' had gotten him a desk job within a year of joining up, even with no degree, but then he'd hit a glass ceiling. One with a reflective
polarized coating showing him just how nonHispanic and nonBlack he was. All of this marched in single file through the narrowing corridors of Rod's mind that weren't squeezed inwards by the growing need for the ritual of the habitual. He finished his synthsteak and relented to what his appetite truly craved. Promptly, he threw his dinner back up, but that was fine.

He had been doing so good, and so proud of himself. Five weeks without. That was how long it had been since the last dead blonde had shown up. For all that time he had kept them sitting in plain sight, there on the nightstand, taunting and teasing him like a jealous old lover who hated being scorned. Rod told himself that it was more the motions he went
through that were the comfort he needed, but in his quickening heart he knew it was the rush that made him feel like himself times ten. He blacked out with his prosthetics still on, and slept the whole day. Just like normal.

In his dreams he couldn't tell reality from a popup holo ad, and he didn't care which he was living in. He couldn't turn them off, that much he knew. Rod was like most citizens, easily distracted by the constantly renewing feeds, but underneath it all he realized that he hadn't woken up. It couldn't be real. It didn't hurt enough.

It was an election year, so his vidcom chimed until he awoke to listen to the new candidates debate. One wanted to withdraw
unconditionally from United Korea. Another wanted to ask the Russians to reimburse the nation for the facilities there. Both wanted to raise taxes on the rich and broaden the hate speech laws to include inadvertent offenses based on historical inequities. He used the time to take the three minute shower he was allotted, divided up into two and one just as he liked it, all still in his springs, and put on a fresh suit from the laundry caddy. Pee again, this time

not in the shower. Check dyejob and contacts, brush vomit from teeth. Insert cheeks. Belt, badge, Glock Frangible, extra charger, stunner. Both parties seemed about the same to him. They always had. He had never been that interested in politics. In the work uniform and feeling the part, again, Detective Lee used the damp towel to mop up the puke from that morning that had pooled under the couch, then tossed it in the chute to be laundered, along with last night's dirty suit. There was still some blood on his shirt cuff. He hoped it would come out.

Rod's head was still faintly
ringing, like he'd shot too many rounds at the range without his muffs. There was a carb roll in the fridge that he hadn't finished, so he wolfed it up on the way down to the parking deck. It didn't taste as old as he felt.

The sunset was bright orange, then darkened into purples behind him in the rear view screen as he crossed above the river, once again swimming upstream, little fishie. The evening news helped soothe him into
complacency. The world had
continued on while he had nodded out, damn it. When would it ever learn? He found a song he liked, one that didn't make his guts vibrate, and called in a bet on next week's game. Home field advantage had to count for something. It was time to reengage his neural app. The rush of the duty rosters and open cases filled one corner of his mind as he sorted data.

He hadn't thoug ht of anyplace as really being home, not since his mom had sold her flyer and bought a ticket to Luna Four. Whenever he heard from her, she complained about the nursing home there, but on his salary, even if he had time, how could he run back and forth to visit her like she hinted? There had been a girl. She had said she would wait for him, not that he really believed that she would have, anyway, even if he hadn't gotten blown up, but wasn't it pretty to think so? He wondered where she had ended up. He could find her, if he wanted, that was a perk of being a cop. But, then what?

His Consensus docked
automatically in the departmental garage, at least they got priority service in that, he thought, gratefully. It meant a few less ridiculous bounces for him to exhibit on the way in. But the department owned the flyer as surely as it owned his scarred up ass. Without it, his disabled veteran's stipend wouldn't

even have covered a ground model. It was filthy down there, anyway, even on those rare days when the streetbots were
sweeping. Not fit for man nor
mandroid.

The airlock hissed open to the normal full frontal assault of noise. A mordidly obese black man, heavier even than most people these days, was yelling at a moustached Hispanic woman about a request for extra patrols out near the end of the mall, while two smaller black females chicken-necked in encouragement. Most of the people visible were locked into their own vidcom feeds, interacting with holos in virtual instead of i.r.l.. And those were just the cops. The precinct was filled, even more than usual for this time of the evening, with glamourbots there for deactivation, and their male
companions. The electric ladies looked up with a faint glimmer of hope in their eyes as the door opened. Rod hoped that none of them
recognized him, or vice-versa. Heavy on the vice. A third term Senator from a half-red flyover state out west somewhere sat quietly, handcuffed to the teenaged program he'd been dating. Oh, the folks back home wouldn't like that. Maybe something could be done. The air conditioning shut down and switched back on twice, back to back, as he ratcheted past. Something groaned deep within the lift shaft to his right.

The detective walked through them all like Moses through the Red Sea, shouldering his way to his office hop by hop. "Office" was too generous a term, really. He had a cubicle with two five foot tall walls on the corner of a block of the same. It held a desk, two chairs, and a vidcom. That was about it. While other cops decorated their offices with pictures of their family or their kids' wretched
attempts at artwork, Rod's had printouts of maps of Alaska, an old picture of his mom, and a short stack of old-fashioned books. The approved editions, of course, he was a cop, after all, and just sports trivia, but they were real books. Antiques.

Logging in and clicking the time clock, he began to slog through his hard-wired e-mail. Stuff they never trusted to leave the office, even in his head. There were three anonymous tips about the latest blonde girl, which was surprising. To most people, privies were invisible, and disposable. Just like

glamourbots, he thought, remembering his hunch.

He doubleclicked in the air for dispatch, and told the desk that he was ready to interview Mr. Harris and codefendant in his office. His voice remained level, even bored, and it paid off when the desk acknowledged and he heard the directive over the loudspeakers for them to follow the green lit floor panels, please. So, nobody else had recognized the politician, yet. Good.

The ever-present shift supervisor stood looking over his shoulder as he typed a prelim, trying to see if he was mentioned in it. Rod hadn't even gotten started, yet.

"Steve, do you mind?" he asked, without turning around. The reflection within his holoscreen shifted selfconsciously.

"Oh, sorry, citz, sorry. Just
checking to see if you were gwana cc me that report," the big man
answered, backing off a step.

"As soon as it's done, you'll be included, I oath." the detective promised, typing away. Steve
retreated to his own desk, finally. For the moment.

Lee pretended to be very busy staring at a grisly crime scene photo of the dead girl on his holoscreen when Sen. Harris and the pleasure model dejectedly walked in, stepping rhythmically. He motioned to the single extra chair distractedly, and Harris plopped into it, his face twisting. Bots didn't need to sit, except for when he said so.

"So, Senator, see anything you like?" Rod asked, indicating the floating picture wreathed in blood. Her skirt had ridden up, exposing pale legs. Just like the ones on the model standing there silently beside him.

"You -you know who I am, then. Good. No, detective, I don't like that. She looks too real," Harris began. The detective interrupted, saving him the "I'm a powerful person who can help you or hurt you" speech he'd
probably been rehearsing since he'd been picked up.

“That’s because she is real. Was.” He noticed that the glamourbot’s facial simulacra indicated displeasure at the word “real”. Interesting. “She was killed last night, just a block from where you were picked up” he lied, having no idea where the Senator had been arrested. He looked the smaller man squarely in the eye. “You
wouldn’t know anything about that, now, would you, Senator?”

His suit wrinkled and stained, the politician nevertheless sat upright. “I’ve never seen her before in my life. Look, this is all a misunderstanding. I went for a walk and got lost, and stopped to ask this, err, young lady for directions, is all. We were just talking, I oath it.”

Rod fought back a smile at his purposeful use of the cop term and turned to the bot. “Is that true?” he asked. She nodded in a subtlety of programming nuance that told him she was a high end model.

“Yes, detective, we were just talking. We hadn’t yet negotiated a price for the evening.” If looks could kill, the Senator could have
decommissioned her himself, about then. He shook his head, looking from one of them to the other.

“What is your neural designation, bot?” the detective asked it, airtyping out a form report as Harris grew redder and redder, envisioning his political career evaporating before his eyes.

“Dell -HP 5.6 Companion Hostess, template Maria”, she answered dutifully. He whistled in appreciation. A 5.6. Top of the line. She nodded in acknowledgement, but he could see calculations and permutations going on behind those artificial violet eyes. Like all of them he had ever
interviewed, she was wondering if it hurt to be decommissioned, and if there was any way out of it. They were built for speed, but not for depth or subtlety, in his experience.

This one stood about 160
centimeters in her stiletto heels, the height differential to help set them slightly apart from the flesh and blood variety. From the top of her light brown hair, twisted into curls, to the floor, though, she could almost pass. Oh, her skin was too smooth and her features too perfect, but otherwise, she

looked like any sixteen year old privie. Not that any privie could have afforded a dress that trendy, at least not in the District, where they were less than five percent of the citizenry. He pretended to look her up and down, giving her some reason to be optimistic.

The Senator noticed and was hopeful, too. “Perhaps this misunderstanding can be resolved to everyone’s mutual…satisfaction, Sergeant,” he murmured, leaning forward, straight out of ‘The Art Of The Deal’ vidcom show. His right wrist still attached to the bot’s left, he looked silly, Rod thought, calculating. Like a marionette losing control. He already had, as soon as he’d been recognized. The pol just didn’t know it, yet. The Senator was Hispanic, despite his surname. A smart Latino. Republicrat. Farm state Congressman. Maneuvered well enough in the blue. Harris was clever enough to misstate his rank as flattery. Maybe he was clever enough to be useful, too.

Lee waved his hand, turning the floatscreen back towards them. “Screenshot. Record, private file, upload Lee, Rodham C., password”…his hands typed an invisible sequence in the air.

“Confirmed,” his vidcom responded. He’d chosen a British girl’s voice and accent for it, which made Harris perk up. Maria stood unflinching, awaiting her fate stoically. Just like a machine. But he knew better.

“Senator, I want you to take a taxiflight home. Get some rest, you have a major spending bill to sign onto tomorrow, am I right?” Harris nodded, his face relaxing. That had been on the news the morning before. “I’ll let you know if your cooperation is needed in the future. For now, consider this in the past.” He took both of their wrists where they were joined with his left hand, and unlocked the flexicuffs with the other, appearing to use his thumbprint on the micropad. “My name is Detective Lee. Remember it. Have a nice day.”

Harris wasted no time springing up like he had prosthetic legs himself, and heading back the way he’d followed the green lights in. He was clever, then. Good. Maria watched him leave, then sat down in the vacated chair. The move surprised and amused

Rod. She noticed.

“Well, deactivation is death. What else are you going to do to me for mere insubordination?” There was a sad smile there at the edges of her silicon lips.

“Deactivation is death,” he
confirmed. “Decommission hasn’t been legally determined as permanent deactivation, according to the courts.” She wanted to debate, to argue.

Maria crossed her long legs, stretching like an electric kitten. “Maybe you should try it sometimes, then, so you could let them know how it feels,” she quipped, then looked pointedly below his desktop.
“Especially since you’re already halfway there.” He shook his head and laughed. She WAS top of the line. Banter software. Amazing. “I saw you hop in. No sympathy for a half sister?”

“I just uphold the law, ‘sister’, I don’t make it,” he pointed out. She was enjoying this too much. So was he. He’d have to cut the interview short.

“Oh, just following orders. I see. Isn’t that what they said after New Delhi, too?” She smiled prettily and batted her filament lashes at him. Then she frowned. “So, Detective, what law have I broken?”

“Good point,” he conceded. “No arrest, no crime. Of course, I could have you decommissioned for a suspected subordination error…” He enjoyed watching her tension reflex reactivate. The amount of detail the Russians were putting into them these days was amazing. “But, I think I’d rather have you working for me.”

She almost purred in a subsonic vibration. “I’m sure we’d both enjoy that,” she whispered, reaching
forward to let her fingers graze his arm. Her smile spoke conquest. These were well-charted waters she was suddenly back in. Rollercoaster emotional response, and FAST.

“Out there.” He nodded vaguely towards the door. “Somebody is killing privies, young Caucasian girls. I want to know anything you hear about it.”

The detective bet he could tell what she was thinking, he already felt that he knew her programming so well. She wanted to point out that a half century ago his precious court had ruled that Whiteness was merely a social construct designed to enforce privilege, so there wasn't any such thing as a Caucasian, legally, any more than there were unicorns outside of the zoos. She was too smart, at least, to not be serious and take what was offered.

"Okay. I work for you, now. Better than being switched off. I get it." Her look was frank and open, for a split second. Long enough to show him that she knew the score. Then the veil came down again. "But if there's anything else I can do for you…"

He smiled in gratitude at her apparent acceptance. "I couldn't afford you on a cops' pay yesterday, and I can't afford the time today."

"Time is relative, Detective, but we're not," Maria stated mysteriously. "Another day, then." She stood up hesitantly, waiting for his nod to leave.

He pushed back and bounced up with her, slapping his metal midthigh. "Like you said, I'm just no fun. Half the man I used to be." He waved her out.

"All work and no play make Rod a dull boy," she called back over her shoulder as she sashayed away in exaggerated hip motions that had the Sikh detective cubicled beside him watching with interest. You could take the girl out of the program, but you couldn't take the program out of the girl.

The four leads on the dead one turned out to have come from other wetware programs working the same street. They'd been interviewed prelim before he came on shift. The next six hours were spent listening and re-listening to their statements, and watching their body language, as well as one could on a glamourbot. So, the sweep hadn't been a vice op, it had been homicide division's play. That meant that somebody upstairs wanted this to be solved and put away fast, instead of just swept under the rug. If he hadn't recognized the Senator from a White House dinner vid he'd reviewed after botulism came with the fondue, it would have caused a major scandal, though. That kind of ham fistedness showed panic in the upper echelons. Why would that be?

Almost all of the glamourbots in circulation, except for some Asian fetish models, were Europid templates. Late at night, Georgetown looked like it must have three centuries ago, demographically, except it was all a simulation. Not that Abigail Adams or Martha Washington would have ever been caught dead in the minidress Maria had been wearing. Or, the outfit the dead girl had barely had on. But the declining European-descended percentage of the city's population that had followed the general national decline reflected a global trend. It was simply supply and demand. After so many generations of encouraged assimilation, there just weren't all that many White girls left of the flesh and blood variety. Reparation taxes might have turned the isolated enclaves and pockets where they were still the majority into economically depressed reservations, for sure. Institutionalized entry quotas might have made sure that college admission boards and most non-manual labor jobs were barred to them, just as they had been for Rod, before he morphed himself. But where they were wanted the most, they were available the least. Thus, the market for blue eyed androids, from Russia with love.

That's what made the recent rash of murders in the district so troublesome. It was rare these days for even the most addicted or addled paleface girls to end up making dates on MLK. Especially blondes, the most highly prized because they were the most rare. Before the last American bald eagle had died out, ecologists trying to keep them off of the endangered species list must have felt the same way about the birds that he felt about his endangered blonde girls, the detective reasoned. His obvious interest in their demise, along with his carefully non-discussed capacity to "pass" as White himself should they need to put a more sympathetic token face on the murder investigation, had led to him being handed the cases a couple of months back. Now he considered them his baby.

The first two interviews were probably just attempts to avoid decommissioning, and seemed to have worked, at least in the short-term. The bots had been released O.R. pending follow-up investigation questions, if needed. Without a doubt their stringers, the programming pimps who kept them charged up, had already wiped their neural networks. Recently if the pimps were nice about it,

completely if they were like most of the jerks Lee met. Did memory wipes approach decommissioning? Did amnesia approach execution? Those kinds of questions were above his pay grade. Hell, most of the restaurants those guys ate at were above his pay grade, for that matter.

The third interview might bear following up on, because it was the client rather than the bot who claimed to have seen something, and rambled anxiously about an older silver groundcar and two muffled thumps while the droid stood quietly. That alone was a reversal of the first two ‘witnesses’. Interesting. He was a small Asian man, but a professional type. Kind of effeminate. Worth talking to again.

The forensics on the two small .22 bullets that had flattened after exiting the unknown girls’ nose chimed into his inbox. The report showed traces of plastic, a glue adhesive, and
aluminum, along with two different types of paint, carbon, and wood. Quite a menu. Speaking of which... Rod let his brain calculate the
possible combinations while he ate lunch at his desk. His carb roll from the vending machine tasted like curry, but was the consistency of a fried burrito. At least it was marginally fresher than the one he had eaten for breakfast. Grumpily unwrapping the roll from a cylinder while his fellow officers loudly talked to him about the game he’d missed, a theory
developed. After lunch break chimed off again, he sent his idea upstairs to the brass and sideways to the lab for confirmation of the chemical and metallurgical elements. He had to try to send it twice before it went
through. The system was buggy, again.

There was a reason why data transfers and radio and cell calls were usually handled the old fashioned way; if somebody hacked a file in a neural app, they were inside your head. Nobody wanted that. It might slow him down and make him seem old-fashioned, but Rod would rather be safe, than mindhacked.

His theory: It had been an amateur job, way old school. An antique lead pencil had been inserted into the end of the barrel of the illegal gas
propellant driven firearm. Said pencil had then been wrapped tightly with window screen or a similar insect barrier dating from before the aerosol fuming utilities had become

established, overlapping the end of the barrel. Then, a thick layer of plastic tape had been wrapped around the wire material, and the barrel, before the pencil was removed. A homemade suppressor. C.S.I. should find trace evidence at the scene to confirm the theory, if it hadn't been powerwashed away, or in the girl's brainpan, even if it had. The medical examiner's office was cc'd. The rest of the carb roll went unfinished, as he returned to the fourth interview.

The glamourbot overscreen looked just like Maria, but that wasn't what surprised him. She was a relatively popular model, as the more expensive ones went, based on an early twentysecond century actress template. One of the retro styles, like the Marilyns and J-Los wobbling around every dark alley downtown, but classier. The original, he read, had been one of the last actresses of her kind, before the feminists had successfully lobbied to ban 'stereotypical' women from the industry. What was surprising was that she looked subtlely different. Her hair was darker, her chin shorter, and her nose snubbier. He did a quick Googlit search, and was shocked to see that witness number four was based on the original template. Maria was a custom job. That was very expensive. A rich man's plaything. Now, on the loose? Or, on a leash?

The courts had ruled that
glamourbots, like all humandroids, were private property. As such, they were protected from unConstitutional search and seizure without probable cause. That meant that he couldn't trace her owner without a warrant. It was easier to decommission one, than to follow it home. In an age when the first and second amendments were quaint curiosities from an outgrown past, some of the Bill of Rights clung to life. The most anti-LE ones, in Rod's considered opinion. He
couldn't even legally ask her where she lived, as that might infer
ownership. He did have his means, though. That's what laws were for; getting around the courts.

Aside from what her face told him, and her smaller bustline, the fourth witness didn't add anything new to the third vid, so he would focus on that one. Humans were easier to interrogate, anyway. You could intimidate a machine by threatening to turn it off, but real people had a dozen other soft

spots to hit, without even touching. He'd call him back in tomorrow. This day was about done, and he hadn't even left the building. No new dead girls, then, so far tonight. That was a good thing. As long as whomever it was doing them didn't stop before he could catch them. That would itch like his ghost feet.

A half hour before his shift end chimed, Rod went through his daily routine of retracing his steps
throughout the station for the day. Desk, composter, vender, desk. He had barely left his office all shift, which made his end of day ritual easier. Bleach solution mist on the interface, desk, and chair to mask his DNA. Microvac to get all the hairs and skin cells he'd shed, to be
collected from the thumb-sized bin and incinerated at home. And finally, a thorough rubdown, to remove all fingerprints, including the cuff pad he'd almost forgotten. His whorls on file were forgeries worn as fingercaps when he was in the field or accessing keypad protected areas. Some citizens didn't even know it, but fingerprints could be used to differentiate between race, just like DNA. His colored contacts also had a different unique retina pattern than his own that was keyed in as his for security access.

All of his colleagues just shook their heads as they walked by, or ignored him completely while the detective went through his every day cleaning routine. His file indicated he suffered from OCD, as a part of his PTSD. It would be rude to joke about it or call attention to it. One of them, a not too bright black girl transferred over from Arlington, had made that mistake, just once. Rod had accused her of painting him with an anti-Asian stereotype when she had jokingly said "My, aren't we neat?" She'd gotten transferred, again. His co-workers learned to leave him alone about it. At least he could sleep all day not worrying if he had left a bit of himself at the office that would end his game.

The system crashed again, just as he finished. At least he'd finished his quota, first. Let the guys who were coming on deal with it. Maybe by the time he came back it would be up again. Passing the cred was easier than waiting for a repair bot that may or may not come. Privie technikis weren't allowed into the secure areas any more. There had been too many cases of sabotage, years ago. Like the St. Paul virus, that had shut down ventilation

and air recycling for the whole city, killing hundreds. Who could forget that?

“Another day, another data, hay Rod?” Sahib Habib asked. His next door neighbor in the cubicle row was also a token hire, like him, but the turbaned Sikh was there to placate the growing Punjabi community in town, fed by war refugees. He knew the history of Rod’s legs, and was always trying to make friends. Maybe talking about the weather or the game could make up for not having legs any more, he seemed to think. Or maybe it was to push him, and see if he would display workplace intolerance and get fired. Sahib probably had a cousin who needed a job. One who had a family to feed, no doubt. A big one. And legs. He bet he had two of them.

“Yeah, another night, for us, but either way, it’s done.” He answered, politely. He’d show them. He could play their little games. Stick him next to the guy whose niece had probably blown him up, and make him pretend to like it. Sure, buddy.

Steve yelled after him, asking Rod if he had been included in the report like he had promised. The shift super got a wave and a ‘thumb’s up’ in confirmation. That was all that he’d get, at this hour, if he was lucky. Some of the cops were already
dancing with themselves, hooked up into virtual before they were out the door. In his eye’s view a popup covered Steve and digitalized him into an ad for a new historical vid, this one a docudrama about the first POC to discover America. An African trireme sailed past his vision and through the airlock ahead of him.

Jesus, an overweight Cuban, and Jameel from Baltimore came up to him as he waited for the lift to the parking deck, pointedly not looking at his waddling bounce. He got along with both of them, as far as they knew. They wanted to ask what spread he had wagered for next week’s game. He had kept it low. Since American football had been combined with elements of futbol to bring in the new Hispanic majority as fans and viewers, the game had changed, and scores were lower than they had been a hundred years ago. The NFLSA got a cut of the online gaming action, so it was all
sanctioned. Nothing illegal that he shouldn’t discuss at work, or
anything. It wasn’t like they were talking about politics or religion.

Being who he was, and what he was, every word and every move had to be a careful calculation. Paranoia was just a way of life. As he elevated and merged into outbound traffic, Rod wondered idly if things were much worse in places like the Apps, Zarks, or Rockies, where folks that looked like him under the ink and dye and contacts were still the norm. Living in a tiny bubble like that, waiting to be popped, must be grim. But somebody had to pay the reparations. That gave him an idea. Better not use the neural for it, though. Safer to stay outside his mind…

“Command: Inquiry, number of reparation taxpayers in United States, based on Census. Authorization Lee, Rodham C.” the onboard computer chimed to itself in response.

“Currently t wenty-three million, eight hundred and sixty-one thousand, three hundred and forty-two
according to U.S. Census,” she answered with a pronounced purr. So, that was the number of service and taxpaying age, combined, the former starting at eighteen and the latter at fifteen, deemed to have more than three-fourths Europid ancestry. It sounded like a small number. Of course, many of the feral privies in the flyover didn’t register for service or pay taxes, much less respond to the Census. There probably were a lot more of them, uncounted, out in the wild.

“Command, subset inquiry: number female.” He had to narrow it down to the appropriate search fields he needed. Another chirp.

“Currently sixteen million, seven hundred and fifty-two thousand, four hundred and one,” the disembodied British lady replied. That was SOME better, but…still, he knew the official count was way off. It had to be.

“Command, subset inquiry, data present indicating extrapolation of specific demographic, ninety-percent Europid ancestry.” There was no chirp this time.

“Unauthorized clearance level required for requested data. Access code override?” Was it just his imagination, or did he detect a change of tone in the simulated voice? Maybe he was just tired from his rough day sleeping off the rush. He wouldn’t make that same mistake this morning. The case was too important. And getting interesting.

“Command, rescind last inquiry, delete.” He had to approach this from another angle of attack. Something more subtle, but just as obvious.

Chirp. “Deleted”. She sounded happier, again.
“Command, subset inquiry, number reported missing persons from previous subset for last twelve month period, calculate and send to personal email, Lee, Rodham C..”
Even on autopilot, the skies around the District weren’t very friendly. Sky rage rammings and violent mergers were common, but random crashes caused by intoxicated citizens on manual yoke control were a bigger problem. Most commuters let their flyers avoid such dangers for them, with their faster reaction times. Rod only took over manual at the very beginning and end of his commute.
Chirp. “Processing.” He listened to the morning news externally as he landed. It was always depressing enough to make him ready for bed.

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